

## Chapter 1: The Coldest Summer

Not for the first time, the night was a restless one for Harry Potter. His bedroom window was flung open wide, hoping against hope to entice a non-existent breeze into his stifling room. The heat wave engulfing Britain had reached Little Whinging only a few days before and the solid scorching humidity was now almost unbearable. Privet Drive was still the same; the large square houses and the pristine gleaming cars the only things unaffected by the arid heat. The soaring temperatures had made Uncle Vernon more volatile than ever and he delighted in taking his frustrations out on Harry.

‘This is the work of your lot!’ he bellowed one morning, sweat seeping profusely from his beetroot red face, ‘That Lord Voldy-thingy and those Demembelers! This is their doing, that’s what this is! All our trouble comes down to your *lot* in the end!’

Harry was used to being blamed for most of Uncle Vernon’s problems. He needed to vent his anger several times during the day and shouting at Harry appeared to be his preferred method. If it wasn’t the heat then it was work problems (Uncle Vernon couldn’t sell drills if Harry was on his mind), or miscreants in the street (all the scruffy people in the world were Harry’s best mates according to Uncle Vernon), or the hole in the Ozone Layer, which Uncle Vernon swore was caused by Harry’s *abnormality*.

But in the dark of his bedroom Uncle Vernon’s rants didn’t matter much. Nothing much did these days. If Harry’s mind wasn’t drawn to the return of Lord Voldemort then he was back in the Department of Mysteries, staring into the dark veil. The very thought of Sirius made his insides clench. He curled up against the agony of it, as if trying to turn his back on it. But it was no use; no matter which way he turned, or whatever he did, the ghost of his Godfather followed him both night and day.

It was during the long, dark night hours staring down Privet Drive that Harry felt the urge to talk about Sirius. He could imagine what Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia would say if he tried talking to them; the thought was almost comical. He had tried to say something in his letters to Ron but couldn’t quite word it. Hermione was on holiday, too

far away to say the things on his mind. In her last letter she seemed to know what Harry was thinking; she had a way of doing that.

*'...things must be hard, there on your own...I doubt Ron would be much help...talk to me if you need to...'*

And, at times like this, he did need to. And she'd be the best person; she'd let him rant, let him scream; let him talk if he wanted to. And she'd be the only one who wouldn't laugh if the emotion overcame him and he was reduced to angry tears. But she wasn't here, was she? The frustration was as stifling as the heat and Harry wasn't sure quite how much more he could take.

Lack of sleep had made Harry more and more apathetic as the summer went on. The stifling heat, coupled with disturbed dreams on the few occasions he actually managed a few non-waking hours served to heighten his already drawn and skinny look. Uncle Vernon, who was rarely found to miss out on such opportunities, took full advantage of Harry's dishevelled manner.

'Can't you make an effort to look tidy?' he barked at Harry as he sat opposite him at the breakfast table, 'Look at Dudley, look how smart he is. If you must be in this house can't you at least pretend to be decent? To be *normal*?'

'Vernon!' snapped Aunt Petunia, 'Mrs. Number 6 is in her garden! Keep your voice down!'

'Why don't you just tell them you can't sleep?' hissed Dudley maliciously.

'What are you on about?' Harry said back, keeping his voice low.

'I hear you every night,' said Dudley, smirking. 'Last year it was, "*Oh Cedric! Don't be dead!*" and this time its, "*Sirius! Sirius! Come back. I need you! I'm coming to get you!*" What's the matter? Another one of your boyfriends dumped you? And who's this "hermyony"? I hear you whining about her being dead half the time as well.'

'You keep your mouth shut!' spat Harry.

‘Hermyony! Wake Up! Wake up!’ aped Dudley in a girly voice.

Harry got up quickly and made for the kitchen door, rapping Dudley hard on the head as he did so. He made his way into the hall with Uncle Vernon firing violent threats at him and Aunt Petunia shouting about hurting her Duddy-Dinkums. Harry thought it best to get out of the house as quickly as he could. He went to his bedroom and was just pulling on his trainers as Uncle Vernon’s voice wafted up the stairs.

‘Just like his father, maybe Marge was right. Maybe it is the breeding...’

*Ignore it, Harry* said a Hermione-like voice in his head as a car pulled up in the street and the door slammed, *he’s goading you...wants a response...it’s Number Four I think...*

That was a strange thing to say. Voices were coming from outside now, from on the lawn maybe. It was a woman’s this time that Harry didn’t recognise.

‘Are you sure it’s the right street, honey? Maybe it’s the next one.’

‘No, it’s this one. Privet Drive, *look!*’

It couldn’t be. It was Hermione’s voice again but not in his head this time. He sprinted to the window and sure enough there she was, outside with her finger on the doorbell. A shiny blue car sat waiting for her on the road with two occupants in the front seats. The doorbell rang and Harry flew to the bedroom door, yanked it open and raced onto the landing. But not before Uncle Vernon and Dudley had reached the front door.

‘Who are you?’ Dudley spat.

‘I’m Hermione,’ she said pleasantly, ‘Is Har – HARRY! There you are!’

Harry leapt the last few stairs as Hermione rushed into the house, uninvited, to meet him. She clobbered him with bear hug, as his face got lost in the expanse of her bushy hair.

‘Oh Harry, how are you? I’m so sorry I didn’t write more often but I don’t have an owl and Hedwig was exhausted after her last trip to me. I hope you don’t hate me. I’ll make it up to you I swear.’

Hermione didn’t seem to want to let Harry go but Uncle Vernon’s booming voice did the trick.

‘Who are you? And what do you mean barging into my house? Uninvited I might add. I suppose your one of those – those- *things*.’

Uncle Vernon seemed unable to muster the will to say the word *witch*. Hermione opened her mouth to reply but Harry shot her a discouraging look. He was impressed by how unfazed she seemed in the face of Uncle Vernon’s torrent.

‘Hermione, I’m so glad to see you,’ said Harry. ‘But what are you doing here?’

‘What do you mean, Harry? Didn’t you get my letter?’ asked Hermione, puzzled.

‘Hedwig hasn’t brought me any letters since you said how well your holiday was going,’ Harry replied.

‘But I didn’t send it by owl,’ said Hermione. ‘I’ve been home a few days now but, like I just said, I don’t have an owl. I sent you a letter by normal mail.’

‘Well I never got it,’ said Harry, turning to glower at Uncle Vernon.

‘Oh yes, a letter did come for you a few days ago,’ said Vernon coolly.

‘Then where is it? Why didn’t you give it to me?’ asked Harry.

‘I burned it,’ said Vernon calmly. ‘No one writing to you can have anything good to say. The ashes are probably still in the hearth if you want to abracadabra them back together.’

Uncle Vernon looked at Dudley and together they chortled like deranged pigs.

‘You should have read it, Mr Dursley,’ said Hermione politely. ‘It would have brought you good news.’

‘What news could you give me that would be good?’ Uncle Vernon retorted, wearing a look that suggested being spoken to by a witch might somehow infect him.

‘Well,’ Hermione began, somewhat tentatively, ‘Its up to Harry, of course...he has to decide,’ she turned to him, ‘if you don’t want to, its ok...but it might be an idea...and it could be fun...’

‘What?’ Harry asked, bemused.

‘Well, it was Dumbledore’s idea...I said you might prefer the Burrow but Dumbledore thought...but you don’t have to if you’d rather not...’

‘Hermione, spit it out,’ said Harry.

‘Well,’ Hermione began, wringing her hands nervously. ‘The Burrow’s a bit full this summer. Charley and Bill have joined the Order and have gone back home, as well as Bill’s fiancée. You’ll never guess – he’s marrying Fleur! You remember, from the Triwizard Tournament.’

‘Wow,’ said Harry, who wasn’t that surprised as he’d always seen Bill as effortlessly cool.

‘But anyway,’ Hermione continued, ‘with all those extras the house is full. But Dumbledore wants you to be somewhere safe, somewhere you can be looked after. And he realises that place isn’t here.’

‘I’m not going to Grimmauld Place,’ said Harry. ‘Not as long as I live, if I can help it.’

‘He thought that too,’ said Hermione. ‘That’s why I’m here. You see, Dumbledore’s put all kinds of protection on another house, he’s even made Ron Secret-Keeper on it and a couple of Order members are going to be guarding it. He wants you to go there for the rest of the summer.’

Harry wasn't sure he was going to like this, a highly disturbing image of bunking down with Professor McGonagall flashed across his mind as he tentatively asked whose house it was.

'Its mine, Harry,' Hermione replied. 'Dumbledore thought you might like to spend the rest of the summer with me. He seems to think I can look after you. And my mum's easily as good a cook as Ron's, though don't tell him that. But you don't have to come, if you don't want to...'

Her words trailed off as Harry let the impact settle on him. She seemed to take the silence as a rejection.

'But if you don't want you, you don't have to,' she said repeated, looking slightly hurt.

'Hermione,' Harry said slowly, 'just one question.'

'What is it?'

'Do you mind helping me pack?'

She beamed back at him, her broad smile trumped only by the huge grin sported by Uncle Vernon. The sudden realisation of two Harry-free weeks caused such an upturn in his mood that he even offered to carry Harry's heavy Hogwarts trunk downstairs. Dudley seemed totally flummoxed by the whole thing.

'You've got a girlfriend?' he spat as Harry dropped Hedwig's empty cage next to his trunk.

'What's that tone supposed to mean?' Hermione snapped with much more vigour than Harry felt the situation required. Dudley seemed taken aback.

'Doesn't mean anything, not that it's your business. But it's him-its Harry-it's...*him!* Just look at him. And he dreams about you. Cries your name in his sleep like he's found you dead. He's really weird.'

Hermione looked desperately at Harry who suddenly found the pattering of the wallpaper very interesting.

‘You must be desperate to want him,’ Dudley continued. ‘All skinny and ugly. Should’ve been done with his mum and dad, save the world looking at him.’

Hermione suddenly looked dangerous; a look of cold fury had swept into her expression. She reached into her pocket and drew out her wand, Dudley tripped over his fat feet in his haste to get away.

‘One more bad word about Harry and I will jinx you into the middle of next year!’

‘Hermione!’ Harry yelled dragging her away, ‘Let’s just go now, ok?’

With what looked like a surge of reluctance Hermione pocketed her wand and followed Harry outside. He dragged his trunk and Hedwig’s cage to the car where Mr. Granger heaved them into the boot. He was a tall man with flimsy brown hair but a warming look and deep hazel eyes. Mrs. Granger was sat in the passenger seat and Harry immediately saw where Hermione had inherited her bushy hair. Harry thought they both had a dentisty-look about them, and not just because of their perfectly formed, pearly white teeth.

‘Hi,’ Mrs. Granger smiled as she twisted around in her seat, ‘you must be Harry. Hermione’s told us lots about you, it’s almost like we know you. She hardly stops talking about you, you know. Its Harry said this and Harry did that and Harry the other. If I didn’t know better I’d say she was quite taken with you.’

She gave a wry smile to Hermione and a little wink. Hermione blushed crimson and turned away from Harry muttering ‘*Mum!*’ so Harry could barely hear. The car moved away as the door to number 4 Privet Drive closed. None of the Dursleys had come to see Harry off. As Privet Drive disappeared into the distance, Harry looked at Hermione with an insatiable grin clinging to his face. She was taking him away from the Dursleys for two whole weeks. He didn’t think he’d love her any more than he did at that very moment.

## Chapter 2: The Blue Room.

The trip to Hermione's house was quiet, largely due to the fact that every time Hermione looked at Harry her face turned a shade of scarlet that an enraged Uncle Vernon would have been proud of. Every now and then one of Hermione's parents would shoot random questions at Harry, especially at times he was least concentrating.

'So, Hermione tells us you're one of the best pupils at your school?' Mr. Granger asked.

'Yes I always brush my teeth before bed,' Harry answered stupidly.

'That what we like to see,' Mrs. Granger beamed, 'someone with good oral hygiene habits.'

'I'm not one of the best, Hermione is the best by far...'

Harry tended to lose the thread in most of these chats. He felt oddly nervous but couldn't explain why. The euphoria of leaving Privet Drive had been replaced by a distinct fear that even Lord Voldemort would struggle to conjure. Harry was running over the idea of staying with Hermione's family and couldn't help but feel anxious. Where would he sleep? What would they talk about? Did they know how bad his feet could smell?

When they finally arrived at Hermione's house Harry was pleased to find it normal and not in the least bit intimidating. A handsome, 3-bedroom suburban semi at the bottom of a cul-de-sac. It looked a little like Privet Drive but the houses were white and pebble-dashed rather than red bricked and square. Most of the houses had garages where, presumably, people kept cars much like Uncle Vernon's. The Granger residence had a garage, a spacious building with tools dotted here and there and a workbench at one end.

'My dad does a lot of craft things,' Hermione whispered as Harry eyed the workbench, 'Likes to paint models and things. Mum won't have it in the house, much too dirty.'



Harry heaved his trunk out of the boot of the car, politely declining Mr. Granger's offer to do it. He was, after all, turning his house over to a complete stranger and Harry didn't want to seem completely useless.

'Hermione, honey,' Mrs. Granger said, 'why don't you show Harry where he'll be staying, unpack some of his things?'

'C'mon Harry,' Hermione chirped as she skipped away towards the front door. The hallway was pretty much as Harry had expected; a shining white banister led up the curly staircase, a large hat stand stood in one corner and the whole place was carpeted in a kind of dull lavender. Harry looked along the hallway towards the kitchen, half expecting to see a sterile waiting room at the other end.

Harry heaved his trunk upstairs and onto the landing. This, too, was sterile and tidy; the walls papered in lemon colour and five plain white doors leading to the three bedrooms, bathroom and lavatory. Hermione was standing in the doorway of the room on the left hand side and Harry lugged his trunk towards her.

'Well, this is it,' she said, a trace of anxiety in her voice, 'It's a bit bland, but hopefully you'll find the bed comfy.'

The room was the best so far. Cool blue wallpaper and a squashy beige carpet, one big window looking out onto the street and a large wardrobe against one wall. There was a television in one corner next to a handsome pine bookcase and next to that a dresser on top of which Harry deposited Hedwig.

'Can I let her out?' Harry asked.

'Of course,' replied Hermione, crossing to the window and opening it for Hedwig to soar out. She encircled Hermione one before hooting gleefully out of the window.

Hermione still looked anxious, the tips of her fingers fidgeting against each other.

'You don't mind staying here, do you Harry,' she asked gently.

'I think its great,' Harry smiled at her, 'I like the room. Better than Dudley's second-hand room I get at Privet Drive. And I love that I'm with you. Sorry If I seem a bit awkward or anything, its just that I'm so happy to be away from Privet Drive and back with friends I just think I'm going to wake up soon and be back there. Trust me, I'm really happy to be here.'

'You wouldn't rather be at the Burrow?' Hermione asked tentatively.

Harry thought. It was a good question. Why had Dumbledore decided the Granger's was the better place for him? Not that it mattered really. He thought again about Hermione's question and found himself surprised at the answer.

'No, I wouldn't,' Harry replied, 'I can't explain it. I don't know...maybe its just...too many people, you know? I'd have Mrs. Weasley fussing over me morning, noon and night, massive worry about the work of the Order, stuff like that. I've got my own troubles, you know. Things I need to work through before I go back to school. And no, don't get excited, it *isn't* my homework!'

Hermione chanced a giggle; it seemed to relieve her of a weight of nervousness. Soon they were chatting like normal, Hermione running off all the extra work she'd done for almost all their summer homework projects, Harry moaning about the horrors of living with the Dursleys, Hermione babbling happily about her obsession with S.P.E.W. Then came the breakthrough Harry was itching for.

'And what about, you know – what happened at the end of last year,' said Hermione slowly.

'I've thought a lot about Sirius,' he said blankly.

'I don't doubt it,' Hermione replied with a look of deepest concern, 'And about V-Voldemort?'

'Yeah, him to,' Harry replied bluntly, 'its been hard, really hard. I'm...well, I've...I mean to say...'

'You don't have to say anything you aren't ready to, Harry?'

‘For a while it left a big hole in me,’ Harry said as though he hadn’t heard her. ‘I couldn’t face it, couldn’t face life. But I have to, the prophecy means I have to.’

‘What prophecy? The one Neville smashed? You know what it said?’

‘Yeah, and I have to tell someone. Perhaps they can make more sense of it that I can. Can you take bad news? Of course you can, you’re my best friend and you’ve had five years practice!’ Hermione gave a hollow laugh. ‘Dumbledore heard the prediction, Trelawney made it to him. I know, she must have had an off day or something,’ said Harry to Hermione’s look of sheer disbelief. Harry continued, ‘It said that...well, basically, in the end, either Voldemort or me must die because one of us can’t live if the other isn’t dead. It means I have to become a murderer, or be murdered by one.’

Hermione wore a look of such horror and mortification that Harry wished at once that he hadn’t said anything. Her eyes were sparkling and her lip slightly trembling. Harry felt awful for the first time in hours, which was something of a record.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t want to upset you,’ Harry said apologetically, ‘I just had to tell someone. I’m sorry it had to be you.’

‘Oh, *Harry!*’ Hermione squealed and she flung her arms around his neck, burying her face into his shoulder, ‘I’m glad you told me. I assume no-one else knows. Oh, Harry, this is awful. And to think, you’ve had to go through this alone for a month. What with everything else on top. I’m so ashamed of myself.’

‘Why?’ Harry said with a laugh, awkwardly patting the back of Hermione’s bushy hair.

‘I should’ve known, sh-should’ve tried to...but I didn’t and...a-and you were...all by yourself, with no-one...without me...or anyone,’ she added almost as an afterthought.

‘I didn’t want to burden you,’ Harry explained, ‘You had your holidays to enjoy. You hadn’t seen your parents for a year, which was partly my fault because of my hissy fit that ruined your Christmas when you had to come and sort me out.’

‘Oh there you go again, trying to be selfless and noble,’ Hermione sobbed, ‘can’t you just focus on yourself for once. You’re special, Harry, it’s about time you took that seriously.’

‘You’re starting to sound like Dobby,’ Harry said warningly.

‘Right, come on, pull yourself together, Hermione,’ she said to herself. ‘Let’s get your things unpacked and then we can introduce you properly to my parents.’

‘I thought they said they practically knew me already,’ said Harry. ‘Was that true, what your mum said in the car?’

‘Oh that?’ said Hermione blushing furiously and turning away. ‘She was just teasing, you know what mother’s are like.’

‘Well, actually, no – I don’t.’

Hermione looked mortified. ‘Oh Harry! I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean – ‘

‘It’s okay,’ he replied. ‘I can’t miss what I never knew. Just come here and help me with this case, it’s a bit of a mess.’

### Chapter 3: Summer at the Granger's

The first night at Hermione's house was an unusual one. Harry imagined that this must be what the phrase *happy families* referred to. Mostly, Harry had been used to one of two things in his life: one was being downtrodden by Uncle Vernon, scoffed at by Aunt Petunia and being the depository for all of the things Dudley grew bored of. The other was being hero-worshipped, ogled at by passers-by whose eyes shot straight to his forehead as soon as they heard his name. But that night Harry was in an altogether new world, an unfamiliar domain that gave him the fleeting impression of what Uncle Vernon would have described as '*being normal*'.

Because this is precisely what Hermione's parents were. Normal. Normal people, with normal lives. They just happened to have produced a rather extraordinary daughter. A rather inane grin had forged itself upon Harry's face and it must have seemed strange to all who could look at him. Hermione kept shooting him pained, desperate looks as though fearful he might have some kind of depression-induced seizure at any moment.

She had been acting very strangely since their heart-to-heart in his bedroom. She kept gazing at him with a very peculiar expression, one that Harry couldn't quite decipher. Was it pity? Was it sorrow? Harry never had been very good at gauging Hermione's emotions. During dinner she seemed determined to not allow him to do anything himself. He only had to say, 'Pass the...' and whatever it was, salt or pepper or water, it was in front of him before the words left his mouth. Once or twice Harry checked under the table that she didn't have her wand out performing Summoning Charms. Even her father noticed it.

'You all right there, Harry?' he asked with a smirk.

'Yes, thank you Mr. Granger,' Harry replied politely.

'Because if you can't cut your food or lift the fork to your mouth I'm sure Hermione wouldn't mind...'

'*DAD!*' Hermione hissed, blushing furiously. Her father smiled at Harry who couldn't help but smile in return.

After dinner they made their way into the living room. It was wonderfully decorated and Harry liked the cosy warmth of the place. The carpet was fluffy and royal blue, there were two comfortable armchairs facing the television in the corner and a two-seater couch against the back wall. Harry was delighted to see a burnished oak bookcase, either side of a grand fireplace, stretching the length of the wall facing the couch; it just wouldn't be Hermione without a veritable array of thick, complicated books to entertain her. She, again, wore the look of anxiety she had shown when Harry entered his bedroom; he knew she wanted his approval.

'This is a lovely room,' he said to Mr and Mrs Granger, Hermione's face lit up, 'and that fireplace is fantastic. Have you read all those books yet, Hermione?'

He asked the question with a grin and all three of the Grangers laughed; clearly Hermione's bookworm ways weren't confined to Hogwarts. They sat down, Hermione positively jumping onto the couch next to Harry, and Mr and Mrs Granger turned their seats around to face them. They chatted away for several hours, covering mostly school topics. Hermione's parents proved to be a captive audience, gasping and praising in all the right places as Harry recounted some of the more dramatic events of the last five years. They were, though, scarcely able to hide an expression of growing concern for their daughter's safety.

'So, Harry,' Mr Granger began, 'Hermione tells us that your parents died at the hands of this, Voldemort, or whatever he calls himself. That must have been a terrible shock to find out.'

'DAD!' Hermione yelled, her face dropping to a look of horror, 'You don't ask things like that!'

'No, it's ok,' Harry said, startling himself with the ease in his voice, somehow he didn't seem to mind talking about it here, 'Well, it was a shock. For eleven years I thought they'd died in a car crash. So, being told an evil wizard killed them was definitely the last thing I expected. I haven't been able to forget it, or even deal with it really. Not with this scar, I got it the same night they were...well, you know. Every time my scar is mentioned I remember how I got it. Then, I've

had to deal with Voldemort's return, more dragging up of old memories along with everything else. I had to hear their screams when the Dementors came to Hogwarts. And I had all those stories written about me in the Daily Prophet. They said I cried over my parents all the time, which I don't, but sometimes...well, I'm only human after all.'

Hermione's eyes were welling up with tears, her cheeks were twitching and her lips trembling.

'Oh, Harry,' she stuttered, 'I never knew. Why didn't you say anything?'

'Too busy denying it, weren't we. That and...*other things*.'

Hermione's look changed in a flash. Gone was the half-pitying half-guilty expression, replaced by a confused, questioning one. She was staring into Harry's eyes and he had a fleeting query in his mind as to whether she had learned Legilimency. It wouldn't surprise him, she was incredible after all.

There it was again. An unexpected thought. This time he couldn't hide the startled look on his face and he knew Hermione had seen it. Harry hoped at that moment that she hadn't studied the mind-reading technique...

They went to bed half an hour later. Harry made quite a fuss of brushing his teeth very loudly, as he had the overwhelming impression that the Dentists Granger were outside, ears pinned to the door. As he left the bathroom they were standing outside the door to the bedroom at the far end of the corridor, loitering awkwardly. They both bade Harry a cheery goodnight as he went into his room and closed the door quietly.

Harry heard the door to Mr and Mrs Granger's bedroom close soon after his and began to undress. He decided to make an effort to stay tidy, reluctantly resisting the urge to toss his sweatshirt onto the floor and folding it neatly into his trunk. He unbuckled his jeans just as the handle to his door was eased down and the door opened.

'Hermione!' Harry cried quietly, flinging his arms up to his chest then back down as his jeans started to slip down, 'Do you mind, I'm changing here!'

'Oh, sorry,' she said, blushing before taking a strangely long time to turn around. Harry felt slightly uncomfortable being in the spotlight like this, imagine what Hermione's parents would think if they walked in.

'I'm going to change now so no peeking! I said *no peeking!*' Harry whispered.

Harry kept his eyes focused on Hermione as he slipped out of his clothes and into his pyjamas. Several times her head moved slightly, causing Harry to either protect his dignity or else dive to the floor seeking refuge from the edge of the bed. He slipped into bed, told Hermione she could turn around, then marvelled at how comfortable the bed was. Even Hogwarts would have difficulty competing with this.

'Harry, I'm really sorry about earlier,' Hermione said with a consoling look as she sat down on the bed, 'my parents do tend to be blunt. I'm sorry.'

'Its OK, really,' Harry said.

Hermione reached out her hand and squeezed Harry's forearm, which was on top of the quilt. She smoothed it gently as she spoke.

'I want you to promise me Harry that if you ever need to talk, ever...about anything...you'll come straight to me. No more bottling stuff up. You can talk to me about anything, don't be afraid to,' her hand starting smoothing a strange figure of eight pattern along his forearm, 'I hope you feel comfortable here. That you're not wishing you were...well, *elsewhere*.'

'I don't want to go to The Burrow, Hermione,' Harry said firmly, 'Right now, there's nothing there that I want.'

Hermione seemed to shudder slightly. She gazed at him with that look that Harry couldn't explain. If he had to put a word to it, maybe it'd be adoration. Maybe. But this was Hermione. Though didn't she



look pretty tonight? He hadn't noticed it for too long. The thoughts washed over him and with each one the surprise lessened, but the flutterings beneath his chest intensified.

'Well, we'd best get some sleep,' Hermione said after a while, breaking the reverie, 'Goodnight, Harry.'

She made quiet an effort of leaning over him to give him a light peck on the cheek furthest from her. She was scented, an intoxicating floral aroma that did something hypnotic to Harry's brain. Then it happened.

As she pulled away, she hesitated, only for a moment, but she stopped. Harry looked at her face, she was definitely too close. But he didn't mind. In fact, he wanted to inch closer. *Just do it* a voice said in his mind, *reach out...do it...she wants you to...she's just a Golden Snitch, except you have to catch her with your lips...go on...closer...closer...*

Hermione suddenly straightened up and pulled away, though hardly blushing at all this time. They exchanged a significant look; Hermione smiled at him. He wanted her back...wanted her close...to hold her...

'Night, Harry,' she said as she reached the door.

'That perfume you're wearing,' Harry said before he could stop himself, 'Is that...er, the one Ron gave you?'

Hermione looked offended. 'No, she said. To tell the truth, it's a bit, well, *masculine* to be honest. I, um, prefer a good book, me,' she smiled shyly, 'Get some sleep, Harry. I'll see you in the morning.'

Hermione turned off the light and Harry closed his eyes. How could he sleep? What a notion! All he could see was Hermione, her face so close...her skin so smooth...her lips...

Though not quite sure how he'd managed it, Harry did manage to sleep that night. He was awoken gently by Hermione at 10:30 the next morning. She had brought a tray of toast and a pot of coffee and a copy of the Daily Prophet. She had a strange glow about her; Harry was mesmerised.

'Morning,' she said softly.

'Its late,' Harry said, 'why didn't you wake me?'

'I just did! Anyway, you looked so, well, cu-*peaceful*,' Hermione said, correcting herself quickly.

'Anything good in there?' Harry asked with a nod at the wizarding newspaper.

'No, not really,' Hermione said ruefully, 'Nothing about you at all...'

'What about *real* stories?' Harry asked with a grin.

'Oh well,' Hermione said quickly, her now familiar crimson blush sweeping across her cheeks, 'No. Just some stuff about the Death Eaters. Nothing major.'

She dipped her eyes behind the pages, the embarrassment etched into face. Harry got up a short while later, dressing in private after Hermione had left the room somewhat reluctantly. He threw on a pair of his nicest jeans and a T-shirt, fought a futile battle to straighten his hair before making his way downstairs.

'Morning, Harry,' said Mr Granger jovially, 'Slept well I hope?'

'Yes, thank you,' Harry replied, 'that bed is magical. Has Hermione been tampering with it?'

Mr Granger chuckled before kissing Hermione on the head and leaving for work. Harry and Hermione spent most of the day lolling around the house or garden. It was a fine day and Harry enjoyed spending most of it on the small putting green Mr Granger had had installed in their vast back garden. Having never played golf before Harry was pretty useless; he was sorely tempted after several particularly poor misses to wrap the golf club around the cherry tree at the bottom of the garden, but managed to restrain himself. Hermione, for her part, seemed more than happy to give Harry pointers.

'You're holding the club wrong,' she said after Harry was forced to bite the club handle in anger, 'Come here, and let me show you.' She wrapped her arms around him and slid her hands down onto his, positioning them on the club, 'You just...um, well, hold it...like...like this, and...touch it, touch it gently...um...'

She let go of him, fiddling furiously with her hair as she stepped away from him. Harry felt more disappointed than he thought was healthy.

That night Harry never slept at all. His mind was awash with all sorts of conflicting things and he couldn't relax at all.

*Its Hermione. She's a friend. Why I am I suddenly thinking about her like this?*

He remembered Dudley's taunting, and the incident which caused it. He shivered at the very memory of Hermione lying there, that purple flame curse still whipping through the air...

*But I cant like her, I'd have known before now. And she cant like me. She likes someone else, we've thought over this before.*

Harry put that thought out of his head. For some reason the mental image of Hermione and anyone but him at this moment made anger boil up in his depths.

*Its because she's brought me here. Yes, that's it. She taken me from Privet Drive and I'm all happy with her because of it. It isn't anything else. It certainly isn't THAT! No, I'll sleep now.*

And he did. But not well. He dreamt he was a contestant on a game show and the host was asking members of the audience to give reasons why they thought Harry and Hermione were involved for money. Rita Skeeter was given ten Galleons for reciting her Daily Prophet article and Krum and Cho were given a joint prize for their views on the matter. Then Luna Lovegood stood up saying that Harry was linked to Hermione by a Humpbelled Lurgymurk and that meant there was no doubting the matter...

#### Chapter 4: Ignorance is Bliss.

After the golfing incident Harry had the feeling that the summer with Hermione would be slightly different than he'd first imagined. He wasn't quite sure what he wanted; his feelings up to this point had been pretty confused on the matter. He knew, without doubt, that he definitely *liked* Hermione; the events they had shared together, particularly over the last few months, had formed a bond between them that was both strong and intimate. It was only now, back in her company, that Harry realised what had been missing at Privet Drive during his sleepless nights.

But there was something else; something that Harry would have liked to deny was there before. But the truth was, it had been there for quite some time, not so much bubbling under the surface but floating around, almost waiting for him to make his mistakes and open his eyes. Harry noticed that his gaze, quite outside his own conscious control, had developed a tendency to rest on Hermione and he found these moments quite enjoyable. They provided a rare occasion when Sirius was off his mind...when Voldemort hadn't really come back at all...

As it was sweltering hot over most of the British Isles the fashion for the day was to wear as little as was decent as often as possible. This had a profound effect on Harry in several ways. Firstly, since he didn't own a wide variety of Muggle clothes he was forced to wear jeans all the time, making him very sweaty and uncomfortable, especially since Hermione was fond of taking Harry on long, winding walks. He did, thankfully, own several t-shirts so he wasn't totally overdressed for a heat wave.

It was, however, the change in Hermione's dress that had the most impact on Harry. Having spent very little time with Hermione outside of Hogwarts, he was used to seeing her only in her school robes. He did have several particularly vivid memories of her in a floaty, periwinkle blue dress, worn on a night when he remembered being particularly captivated with her. He kept these memories, however, so deep that even Snape's Occlumency attacks last year couldn't find them. Harry did let these memories surface every so often, but always when he was on his own.

He had seen her outside school at Christmas, but then it was winter and wouldn't have prepared him for what was going on now. Why he had never considered it before was a mystery to him, especially since it seemed a pretty obvious piece of information to overlook. Hermione, it transpired, owned a full, and regularly updated, set of Muggle clothing, catering for every occasion and season. The most interesting of these garments (although Harry had by no means been rifling through Hermione's drawers to see all her clothes) were a set of skirts in different colours, materials and, most intriguingly for Harry, lengths. As it was summertime, Hermione had taken to wearing skirts on most days, a trend that Harry tried hopelessly not to find as distracting as it was.

The effect of the skirts was marked in Harry's behaviour. He and Hermione tended to spend as much time sitting down as they did walking, and the close proximity of the skirts to Harry at these times made him freeze with nerves. They did, however, serve to distract him from all the negative thoughts that had plagued him during the summer, but often tended to come up at rather inappropriate times.

'Have you thought any more about Sirius?' Hermione asked as they sat on the grass in a local play park. She seemed keen to bring up this subject as much as she could, thinking that talking about the incident would somehow make it easier for Harry to deal with. Although he found it difficult to put into words exactly what he was thinking, he couldn't deny that talking about it did ease the weight of guilt; Hermione had a way of soothing his fears that it was his entire fault, assuring him that he wasn't at all to blame.

'Yeah, a little,' Harry replied vaguely, his mind distracted, 'It skirt really bad at first, but talking about it...I dunno, made it a bit easier I s'pose.'

'It *skirt* really bad?' Hermione smirked, 'What's that supposed to mean?'

She had a shrewd look on her face, mingled with a sort of innocent curiosity. Harry considered the contrast on her face; a sly, cunning, almost vampish look mixed with a shimmering innocence that had him bewitched. Harry thought she was the perfect contradiction.

'I didn't mean that,' Harry said as he felt the colour betray him in his cheeks, 'my mind was, well, *elsewhere*.'

'Clearly,' Hermione laughed, but Harry was warmed; if she knew where his mind had been, which she certainly seemed to, then it didn't look like she minded. Was she trying to tell him something? Did he really want to hear it? He was fidgety now, aware only too acutely of the flushing in his cheeks, thinking how stupid his arms looked flopped limply at his side, and his hair...he didn't even want to get started on that.

'C'mon,' Hermione beckoned, 'let's go. We'll be late for tea if we don't get a move on. She offered him her hand and helped him up; he couldn't quite meet her eye, having the overpowering sensation that if he did she would burst into peels of giggles. He didn't really want that.

Two days later and Harry had been with the Granger's for almost a week. He didn't want to leave. Hermione kept mentioning the Burrow with as much subtlety as she could manage but Harry was telling the truth when he said he had no interest in the place. It wasn't so much not wanting to see Ron and the Weasleys that generated this feeling, more a growing dislike of all the moments he spent out of Hermione's company.

This whole developing sensation was starting to affect Harry's state of mind. He was getting used to waking up in the morning and having Hermione sitting next to him on his bed. Although not quite a double bed it could easily have squeezed two people onto it fairly reasonably, allowing Hermione to clamber on in the mornings without disturbing Harry's sleep. Yesterday, he had woken to find Hermione snuggled up to him, fast asleep, with the *Daily Prophet* hanging precariously from the side of the mattress. She had obviously dozed off whilst reading, but it had left Harry paralysed with a tension he had never experienced before. Despite this fact, he felt happier having Hermione there, in that position, than he would openly admit.

That day, Hermione decided, would be an Advance S.P.E.W day. She sat around for most of it making elf clothes, though Harry had to agree with her when she said she wasn't quite as good at knitting without magic. Harry's job was merely to aid and observe, a task he

found more than suited him, thanks in no small part to Hermione's choice of garment for the day. It had the effect of making Harry at least *think* about elf clothes, mostly speculating as to whether house-elves ever wore hemlines as high as Hermione's. Harry accepted that it probably wasn't the kind of thought that Hermione would want regarding house-elf liberation, but maybe it was a start.

She was finding one particularly bobbly bobble-hat a tricky customer. The ball that sat on the top of the hat simply refused to stay there and fell off every time Hermione thought she had fastened it properly. She was getting quite frustrated, deciding eventually to sew it on with a needle and thread.

'Work time, Harry,' she chirped merrily.

'Oh, yeah, right,' Harry said breaking out of his seventeenth hypnotic trance; Hermione hadn't yet turned back to her normal colour after flushing bright red after trance number one.

'Hold this for me, would you?' she said handing him a small needle, 'Hold it steady while I run the thread through it.'

Hermione used one hand to keep Harry's steady, while at the same time using the other one to try and thread the cotton through the needle. It was a fruitless task; Hermione had come over in such a tremble that the cotton thread was not even close to the needle.

'Are you cold?' Harry asked softly, 'I could close the window if you'd like.'

'No, I'm fine,' Hermione said, her voice slightly squeaky, 'just need to be a little closer,' she shifted in so her face was inches from the needle, Harry felt his face involuntarily tilt in as well, 'just need to push it...try and get it...almost there...maybe...'

It was little wonder to Harry that she was missing the needle. She spent half her time sending little glances up at him, taking her focus off the needle at the time when she needed to concentrate the most. Her eyes were shining, her expression soft. She had stopped talking now, though her mouth was opening and closing despite the fact that no words were coming out. Harry could see the corners of her mouth

trembling; why were they doing that? Her neck seemed to vibrate slightly every time she breathed, which Harry now saw was quite often, much more than was normal. To his surprise, he found his breath was quick too, every time it wasn't caught in his lungs, that is.

Hermione's head edged in closer; maybe she wanted a closer look at the needle. Her hand holding the thread had dropped and Harry felt it as it groped around beneath him, eventually coming to rest on top of his own. His own head inclined in too; the needle was falling away in his hand, whether through Hermione's prompting or not. A rather unpleasant lump had lodged itself in his throat, he noticed his mouth was painfully dry and something wriggly and squirmy wanted to burst out of his chest. Then a voice cracked the air.

'Hermione, honey, I'm back. Help me with these bags would you?'

It was Mrs Granger. Hermione snapped back, her eyes wide and bright, her face and body shuddering as she got to her feet. She went into the hall leaving Harry to catch his breath and wonder what exactly was happening inside his chest whenever Hermione left his sight.

At the start of the second week Harry was starting, in his mind at least, to call Hermione's house home. Even though it wasn't, Harry couldn't imagine a place to which he would rather attach that name. It was cosy, friendly and safe; he ate well, slept well and relaxed here more than at any other place. The only problem place was his bedroom where, particularly at night, he was plagued with his own questions about the awakening feelings he was trying so hard to suppress.

After all, this was *Hermione* he was talking about. He couldn't possibly feel these things for her, he just couldn't. She was his best friend (he had noticed that Ron and subconsciously abdicated from this role a long time ago) and although he wasn't sure what he was feeling right now it certainly didn't match up with that title. It was more, a lot more, and try as he might he couldn't restrain it. He knew she probably didn't return the sentiment; she wouldn't after all, would she? She was Hermione, people like her didn't notice little people like him.



It was hard for him. Her presence was becoming an addiction, an obsession, but also a hindrance. Sometimes he would see her and feel such a strong surge of...something...from deep inside that he would tense up, unable to speak and barely able to move. On these occasions he experienced what he had come to term as a '*Ginny Moment*' realising for the first time why Ginny used to find it so hard to share the same floor space with him during the times of her crush. He, however, felt he must have grown out of the running-desperately-for-solace phase as he had discovered an anti-dote to the tense freezing. All it involved was as little as a smile from Hermione, or even better some light physical contact, and he was mobile again, allowing him to run into hiding and bury his shameful, silly, scarred face...

During the second week Harry found Hermione in the garden, idly plucking away the petals of a pretty flower. She was chanting some kind of rhyme and seemed oblivious to Harry as he approached and flopped down beside her.

'He loves me...he loves me not...he loves me...he loves me not...'  
Hermione sang dreamily.

'Who you on about?' Harry asked.

'Oh, Harry, hi!' she said breathlessly, a little too exaggeratedly for Harry's liking, 'this? It's, um, er...a, er...teacher I had once. I had a bit of a crush actually.'

'Who? Lockhart?' Harry asked pointedly.

'Yeah!' said Hermione gleefully, 'that'll be it! Yeah. Lockhart...'

Her words trailed off and she looked away, Harry could have sworn she looked slightly scandalised.

'You should find a flower that rules out the possibilities,' Harry said.

'Well,' Hermione said lightly, 'If I knew the answer to the question I wouldn't need to kill pretty flowers in speculation...would I Harry?'

She fixed him with a piercing stare that went right through him. He felt like an Arithmancy question that Hermione was contemplating, her eyes boring into him as if desperate to work him out and move on. She smiled brightly soon afterwards; had she figured him out? Did she know the things that beat against his skull every night, and what happened inside his chest every time she entered a room?

The whole two weeks had taken the same pattern; cosy, delicate intimacy followed by short bursts of awkwardness, then more intimacy. Harry knew which bit he liked the best. The most poignant of these moments came two days before they were due back at school. Most of the day had been spent discussing school but Harry did manage, with surprisingly little effort, to persuade Hermione to hand out more golf lessons; he just couldn't master that grip...

After dinner that night, they all settled down to watch a movie on television. Harry sat on the couch again, with Hermione sat next to him on his left. It became clear after twenty minutes that the exploits of John Rambo weren't of interest to Hermione. She was fidgety, shifting all over the place, each time inching closer to Harry. Harry soon lost interest in the film, captivated by Hermione's thigh as it edged towards his own. His breath was caught frequently in his lungs, his heart pounding against his ribs and a strange feeling of sickness churned in his stomach.

Then she did it; her hand fell casually from her leg and into the miniscule space between them on the couch. Harry heard a familiar voice in his mind.

*Go on, Harry, do it...remember, its just a snitch...reach out...no, no, no...don't edge, REACH...go for it, Harry...where's that daring Gryffindor spirit, eh?*

Apparently, it was in Hermione. Without even looking at Harry, she reached out and took his hand in her own. Waves and waves of tingling electricity shot through Harry's hand and up into his body. His brain was overloading, his skin tingling, his heart hammering so hard against his chest he thought it might spring forth at any second. Maybe she could hear it. She squeezed his hand gently, as if for confirmation that it was OK. He squeezed back, smoothing the back

of her hand with his thumb, and she smiled, lost all pretence and scooted up right next to him. She placed her head on his shoulder and it was too much. The dizziness was almost unbearable.

They stayed like that for the rest of the film, moving only when Mrs Granger stirred and declared she was turning in. Harry said the same; his body and mind were falling apart too much. He had to escape before he exploded.

'Goodnight, Harry,' Hermione beamed, 'See you in the morning.'

Harry stared at her and grinned so wide he thought it might fall off the end of his face. He didn't say anything; the look in Hermione's eyes said that she, too, was feeling all the things that were, at that moment, turning his world upside down.

## Chapter 5: The Ron Factor

Harry awoke next morning to all the twitterings and flutterings that had pulsed around his body the previous night, depriving him of much sleep. He wondered where Hermione was at that moment, finding it strange that she wasn't in his room. He had grown accustomed to waking up and finding her next to him, tea and toast on the bedside table, the *Daily Prophet* open in front of her. But not this morning, and it gave Harry's stomach a leaden feeling.

A series of terrifying thoughts screamed around his mind: did she regret last night? Was she ashamed or embarrassed by it, thus explaining her absence this morning? Did she think it a good idea at the time, but now regretted taking Harry's hand as they pretended to watch the movie last night? One thing was for sure, he needed to speak to her and soon.

He found her downstairs, halfway through her breakfast. She smiled shyly at him as he walked into the kitchen and sat down opposite her. She was blushing slightly, her gaze seemingly directed at anything except Harry. But Harry was determined; he didn't take his eyes off her for as long as was possible, he didn't want to seem rude or pushy. Once or twice he caught her gaze as she chanced a glance at him, her expression difficult to read but at least, Harry thought, she can still look at me.

Harry felt truly awkward with Hermione for the first time in the fortnight they'd spent together. As soon as this feeling occurred to him, Hermione seemed to pick up on it, looking at him intently and throwing him a glowing smile. Harry grinned nervously back but she didn't seem convinced that she had solved Harry's awkwardness. She moved around to sit next to him, speaking in a husky whisper as if trying to be covert.

'Let's just get through today,' she said breathlessly, 'we can, well, sort *things* out, back in school. Okay?'

'Yeah, OK,' Harry said, feeling a relaxation pour over him; at least some of the awkwardness had lifted.

Hermione's dad had agreed to take them into London to buy their school supplies in readiness for the new term. The Hogwarts book lists didn't contain any surprises; the latest *Standard Book of Spells* (Grade 6) and upgrades to *Advanced* from *Intermediate* for all of the subjects they would study in their NEWT years. Hermione had considerably more books to buy, due to the fact that she studied considerably more subjects than seemed neither possible or necessary, nor healthy.

After depositing Mr Granger on the Muggle side of The Leaky Cauldron, Harry and Hermione weaved through the pub, significantly more crowded than Harry could remember it ever being, and emerged on Diagon Alley. After a quick stop at Gringotts, to stock up on money, they made their way along the packed, winding street towards Flourish and Blotts. They had only just stepped out of Gringotts when a shrill voice pierced the air, shrieking in their direction.

'Ooo, look who it is!' It was Pansy Parkinson, a Slytherin sixth year who was part of Draco Malfoy's gang. 'Its Potty Potter and the Mudblood! God, Granger, I thought you were supposed to be *clever*. Hasn't anyone tell you that going out with Potter is like a ticket to death? If not by You-Know-Who then by the Bad Taste Police!'

The gang of ugly, spotty girl-cronies that accompanied Pansy laughed hard as she taunted Harry. Hermione had lost the slightly nervous look she had been wearing all morning, returning to the fiery glare she had worn for Dudley.

'Don't make me hex you, Parkinson!' Hermione scowled, her arm sliding into Harry's and holding it tight, 'I don't want to make you any uglier than you already are, your mother might try to sell you at market.'

The Slytherin girls stopped laughing and looked menacing, Crabbe and Goyle style. Each was about twice the size of Hermione (some actually built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle), several showing traces of facial hair and some with the craters from acne scars. Harry dragged Hermione around so that he was face-to-face with the Slytherins, and drew his wand. They shot him apprehensive looks;

clearly a boy who had survived an attack by Lord Voldemort was a different prospect, and they slouched away, mouthing wordless threats at Hermione.

'Why are you letting all these insults get to you?' Harry asked, 'They're aimed at me after all.'

'People are always picking on you, Harry,' she said pityingly, 'it isn't fair and I won't stand for it any more.'

Harry guided Hermione down the street. It was crammed with people, all clambering over each to reach the tight, claustrophobia-inducing shops, all stacked with bulging bags and parcels, many with flustered children in tow. Flourish and Blotts was just up ahead, the familiar stream of Hogwarts students rolling in and out of the aged shop doorway visible from some distance away. Harry was about to step inside when, over the heads of the thronging crowd, a floppy mass of fiery red hair was making for him.

Ron was now more than six feet in height, tall and gangly, his craned neck towering over most of the younger people around him. He made his way to Harry and Hermione, beaming profusely with a package tucked safely under his arm.

'Hiya Harry, I was starting to think I wouldn't bump into you,' Ron said. He glanced down and saw Hermione; his brow creased as his gaze moved across and saw her arm entangled with Harry's.

'So...got *everything* now, have you, Harry?' Ron said scornfully. He cast several more disparaging glances down at Harry's arm, not even bothering to hide the scowl on his face.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Harry said indifferently, though he thought he could probably guess the problem.

'Oh well,' Ron retracted quickly, not anticipating Harry's cold tone, 'I meant, well...you know...books and...*everything*.'

Ron glanced at Hermione for the first time as Harry replied, 'No, not everything. I haven't got my books yet.'

Harry could feel a sort of possessive anger swirling and gurgling in his chest, his eyes pinned on Ron and, knowing, from the way she tensed up, that Hermione could detect the discomfort of the situation.

‘What’s that you’ve got?’ Hermione asked Ron sheepishly; Harry knew that this was her way of trying to diffuse the tension but he thought it might have been better if she just kept out of it.

‘Oh this,’ he spat, holding up his package, ‘New robes, nothing to interest you. Well, anyway, we’re all down in the Leaky Cauldron having lunch if you wanna join us later. That’s if, of course, you can *tear yourself away*.’

And he marched off. Harry was fuming; he hadn’t felt this mad at Ron since the Triwizard Tournament. He sparingly recalled the pleasure it gave him when he threw one of Malfoy’s *Potter Stinks* badges at Ron, and the surge of masochistic glee he felt when it hit him in the head. Hermione broke this dark chain of thought.

‘What was that about?’

‘You don’t know?’ Harry cried incredulously, making several small children nearby jump for cover.

‘Know what?’ Hermione asked. Her tone was odd and it gave Harry the impression she was feigning ignorance. Still, he wasn’t going to do Ron’s dirty work for him.

‘If you don’t know,’ Harry said sharply, ‘Then you aren’t going to hear it from me.’

Harry stormed into the shop, yanking down several books he didn’t need just to take pleasure in creating a mess, as piles of books tottered to the floor.

‘Calm down, Harry, *please*,’ Hermione pleaded, ‘You’re making a scene!’

Harry looked around and found a crowd of people watching him, several looked disturbed, others frightened; some gleeful in a way that Peeves or the Weasley Twins would respond to the situation.

Harry, though, felt shameful. Not only for what he was doing but also for what he was thinking about Ron, and also for how bad he was making Hermione look.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled.

‘Its ok,’ she said, almost consolingly, ‘Look, move over. *Accio Books!*’ The books flew into Hermione’s arms and Harry took them from her and placed them on the shelves, apologised to the shop assistant and hurried outside after making his purchases. Hermione followed him out and they made their way towards the Leaky Cauldron. As they stepped through the brick wall, and it sealed itself behind them, Hermione drew Harry to one side.

‘Look, Harry,’ she said quietly, ‘Before we go in...’

‘We should act normal,’ Harry interrupted, ‘I don’t want to aggravate Ron. Lets just not do any of the arm-holding thing, OK? I’ll explain to him why we were, well, *intertwined* earlier and see if he calms down.’

‘That’s not what I was going to...’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Harry said quickly, ‘this is what we’re doing. Just go with me on this, please?’

Hermione reluctantly agreed and they stepped inside. The Weasleys were sat in the middle of the floor where two tables had been pushed together. Ginny, Fred, George, Charley and Bill were eating from a variety of dishes while Mr Weasley read the *Daily Prophet*. Ron sat sulkily at the end of the table; Mrs Weasley was on her feet before Harry could even put his shopping down.

‘Harry!’ Mrs Weasley cried as she pulled Harry into a suffocating hug, ‘How are you, dear? We expected to see you this summer. Shame you couldn’t come. Did Dumbledore say why he wanted you to stay away all summer?’

Harry chanced a look at Hermione, but her expression was blank and confused. Clearly, she had no idea why Dumbledore would not have told the Weasley Family the truth of Harry’s absence.



'He didn't say,' Harry said truthfully, 'He mentioned something about it last year, but it was just after Sirius...and I didn't pay much attention, really.'

Mrs. Weasley shot him a pained look and turned to Hermione, dragging her into a softer, yet still bone-crunching hug of her own. Harry was then clobbered by another hug from behind.

'Arry! Eet is so good to see you, though you are steel looking 'ungry.'

'Hello, Fleur,' said Harry as they broke the hug; Harry noticed a disproving look on Hermione's face. 'Congratulations on the engagement.'

'Oh, zen you 'ave 'erd!' Fleur said gleefully. 'Eesn't it wonderful! My seester, Gabrielle, is to be my bridesmaid and she will be so 'appy to see you. She speaks of nothing else!'

Harry, now slightly hot and embarrassed, broke away from Fleur and made for Ron, who turned away huffily. Harry was determined to have his say.

'Look, about earlier,' he began, but Ron cut him off.

'You don't have to explain,' he said acidly, 'Quite obvious to me. You *know* how I fe-...my letters this summer...meant nothing...my friend...supposed to be.'

Ron seemed more enraged than Harry had ever seen in five years of friendship. It was the look he donned whenever Hermione mentioned Viktor Krum. Harry wasn't sure how he was going to explain this away.

'You got the wrong idea mate,' Harry began nervously, 'it wasn't what you think.'

'Yeah?' Ron spat, 'Then what was it?'

'It was...er...' Harry cast his eye around for inspiration for an excuse. It came in the form of Hermione.

‘It was Pansy Parkinson,’ she said matter-of-factly and she trotted up to them.

‘Pansy Par-...’ Ron began, ‘What’s she got to do wi-...’

‘She was goading Harry and me,’ Hermione continued, with her patient, unaffected air, ‘She was saying nasty things about Harry, called me a *you-know-what* and so I just grabbed Harry to show her we didn’t care about her insults. We just forgot to untangle our arms. Then we bumped into you.’

‘Well, I saw Pansy,’ Ron said in a thoughtful tone, as if trying to disprove concrete evidence, ‘She was walking from you, giggling and stuff. She called you a...a *thing*? That bloody *cow*!’

Ron’s mood had changed so dramatically that Harry was taken aback. Soon they were chatting away like nothing had happened, turning the air blue with rants about the Slytherins, Ron using some choice words that made Hermione blush. Harry was bemused, looking at Hermione whenever he thought it was safe, trying to gauge if she knew what she was doing. She caught his eye a few times and smiled, and Harry understood that she had a plan. He hoped it was a good one.

That night, Harry had a most unusual dream. He was walking aimlessly around the Great Lake talking to his Firebolt, which was using its tail twigs to walk. He was telling it how much he loved it and how he would do anything for it. He had to comfort his racing broom that although Ron may be allowed to borrow it on special occasions, it was Harry’s pride and joy in the end. Then he was running around the Hogwarts castle, trying to escape Hermione. She was chasing him with his *Broomstick Servicing Kit*, swearing that she would service his broomstick all the time, and that he’d never have to do it again. All he had to do was knit a few elf hats and they’d be even...

When the time came to board the Hogwarts Express the next day things seemed to have returned to normal. Harry and Hermione had reached an unspoken, unthought, untelepathically-communicated agreement to not mention the last two weeks of summer to Ron. For his part, Ron didn’t push Harry too much on the matter. Harry excused away his two weeks of silence with embellishments about his grief over Sirius’ demise, the worry about the return to prominence

of Voldemort, or the unceremonious shunning that constituted his life with the Dursleys. Ron only commented on the last of these reasons; he seemed awkward and unsure whenever Sirius' name came up and every time Harry mentioned the 'V-Word' Ron looked as though he may be physically sick.

The worst moment came for Harry when the train was pulling away. He, Ron and Hermione had stowed their luggage and pets into a compartment at the end of the train when the latter two reminded Harry that they had to go to the Prefects compartment for the first part of the journey. Hermione gave him the most fleeting of apologetic looks and dumped her cat in his arms.

'Crookshanks will look after you, won't you Crookshanks?' Hermione purred in a baby-voice, 'He's so *gorgeous*, isn't he?'

'And the cat isn't bad either...?' Harry said quietly so only Hermione could hear, trying hard to disguise the hopeful, fishing-for-complements tone in his voice. Hermione grinned cutely but didn't answer, choosing instead to give Harry's hand the quickest and most covert of squeezes before following Ron out of the compartment and down the train.

The train journey was rather dull when you were without your two best friends. For a while, Ginny had sat with him but after twenty or so minutes of awkward silences, following inane and pointless conversation, she made her excuses and set off in search of Dean Thomas. Luna Lovegood was there too, apparently unwelcome in most of the other compartments, but she was immersed in this month's edition of *The Quibbler*, the latest sighting of a buck-toothed vampire clan in Bromley the topic of hot news.

When the lunch trolley wheeled around at around one o'clock Harry bought himself some of everything, choosing binge-eating to while away the hours. No journey back to Hogwarts would be complete without a visit and tirade from Draco Malfoy, and he didn't disappoint on this trip. It was around 3:30, Hermione and Ron still hadn't come to pay their dues and Harry was getting concerned at their lengthy absence. As the compartment door opened Harry swung his head up

expectantly, the look dying from his face when he saw the white-blond head of Malfoy.

‘Expecting someone, Potty?’ Malfoy sneered, Crabbe and Goyle guffawed in his shadow, ‘The tooth fairy perhaps? It’s a useful friend to have considering your new...well, *older friends*.’

Harry went numb. He knew instantly that Malfoy was referring to Hermione’s parents; the tooth fairy jibe aimed at their careers in Muggle Dentistry. Did he know where Harry had spent the summer?

‘Problem, Malfoy?’ said Ron as he emerged from behind the considerably wide frame of Crabbe. Ron and Malfoy were similar in height and stature; both wore matching looks of disdain and loathing, both had fists balled around wands in their pockets.

‘And if I do Weasel King?’ Malfoy snarled, ‘Gonna sort me out are you? You and whose army?’

‘Ours,’ said Hermione from down the corridor. Harry peered towards her voice and saw her flanked by no fewer than ten members of the DA, all with wands drawn, standing behind Hermione like some sort of Royal guard. Malfoy looked uncertain for a moment (undoubtedly remembering his last encounter with the DA), sneered at Ron and shot Hermione the dirtiest look he could muster before trooping off down the train.

‘What did he want?’ Ron asked casually as he sat opposite Harry and pulled several Chocolate Frogs to him.

‘The usual,’ Harry said blandly, ‘Empty threats, meaningless jibes, a few lingering bad odours.’

‘Luna,’ Hermione said softly, ‘someone was looking for you down the corridor, I said I’d send you along.’

‘Oh Ok,’ Luna said wearing an astonished look as if she understood language for the first time, ‘Thanks.’ And she left, not even asking who had called for her. As soon as she left the compartment, Hermione swept into the seat next to Harry and beckoned Crookshanks to sit on her lap.

'I didn't hear anyone call for Luna. Anyway, what's so special about that seat?' Ron asked coolly.

'I like to see out the window,' Hermione said calmly, but her swift glance to Harry, when Ron's head was turned a few moments later, betrayed her motives. She smiled at him and rolled her eyes in Ron's direction. Harry gave a heavy sigh; this year was going to be tough.

## Chapter 6: Defence Again The Dark Snape

Harry was only partly looking forward to the Great Feast that evening. He was a little hungry, but his stomach didn't feel at it's best after being subjected to a relentless stuffing of pumpkin pies, cauldron cakes and chocolate frogs aboard the Hogwarts express. And then there was Hermione; all of what had happened during the summer didn't seem such a perfect idea now that they were back amongst the other students, and one in particular.

Ron had been suspiciously quiet for large parts of the train journey. He didn't seem to be too fond of Hermione's excuse for shooing Luna from their compartment, especially when she had returned to say nobody was looking for her. Harry didn't find this revelation nearly as surprising as Ron, who glared frequently at Hermione and told Harry, in an unnecessarily loud voice, that when he was rich and famous he would enslave fifty house elves and beat them regularly if they worked poorly.

The Great Hall seemed strangely subdued when the students began filing in. The Hufflepuffs against the far wall seemed happy and noisy enough, as did the majority of the Gryffindors next to them. The Ravenclaw table, however, seemed usually packed on one side. It seemed that few of the Ravenclaws seemed keen to sit on the side of the table nearest the Slytherins.

'Well, half of the Slytherins parents are Death Eaters,' Ron said, 'The Ravenclaws probably think they'll get cursed or something if they get too close.'

Ron seemed to be unusually correct. The few Ravenclaws unable to sit on the side nearest the Gryffindor table were bunched at the ends, casting scared glances at their friends and shooting furtive, suspicious looks at the table underneath the green and silver banner. Only the Ravenclaw members of the DA seemed to have the nerve to sit normally against the Slytherin side. Harry saw Cho was there, sitting next to Roger Davies. Both were in their final year at Hogwarts; Harry had a sudden desperate desire to make sure he beat Cho one more time at Quidditch before she left.

Harry glanced up at the staff table to find Hagrid beaming at him. He waved enthusiastically back before glancing along the table. All the teachers were present and correct; even the Centaur Firenze was there, sat down much like a horse would at one end of the table. Harry caught the eye of Professor Dumbledore and his heart warmed; at least Dumbledore wasn't going to ignore him this year. There was, however, noticeable only by their absence, no extra teacher. Defence Against The Dark Arts was the jinxed teaching role at Hogwarts, and clearly nobody had been too willing to fill the post.

A light chatter had risen around the Great Hall. All the students were now seated and the Sorting took place. Harry noticed that the number of Slytherin students seemed far fewer than normal this year, perhaps the parents who supported Voldemort silently saw their children being chosen for Slytherin as a break of their cover. Soon, the sorting was complete and a great silence engulfed the hall as Dumbledore rose to address them.

'I would like to say a few words,' he began, 'but I really cant decide which ones. So please, tuck in!'

A small amount of laughter broke out before all the plates filled before them. Harry forgot his sickly stomach as he pulled a plate of succulent looking steak towards him and began to eat. Hermione, as was her normal feast-face by now, wore a frown that Harry knew the cause of.

'Look,' he said swallowing a mushroom, 'the best way we can help the house elves is by understanding them. If you want to change their world for them you have to first appreciate their current hopes. They hope we enjoy their food, hope we are thankful for their cleaning, *really hope* we enjoy their food! They'd find it insulting if you treated their hard work with contempt and ate begrudgingly.'

Ron nodded, his cheeks bulging with steak and kidney pie, an unsightly trickle of gravy running from the side of his mouth.

'Ron, you've, er, got something there, mate,' Harry said motioning to his face. Ron wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

'So civilised,' Hermione frowned.

The feast was delicious, as usual. After the last helpings of toffee sundaes and chocolate fudge cake had vanished to the house-elves below, Dumbledore rose again to address the school.

‘Welcome, all, to a new term at Hogwarts; I am glad to see so many of you back here in one piece,’ there was a smattering of nervous laughter, ‘Before I let you away to sleep off this majestic feast, a few start-of-term announcements. All students are reminded that the Forbidden Forest is strictly out-of-bounds, even more so than in previous years.

‘Secondly, some of you may have noticed that this year we do not have a new teacher among our number. I’m afraid, I have been unable to procure one, so the traditional start-of-year welcome for a new Defence Against The Dark Arts professor is shelved for this year,’ Ron chortled somewhere to Harry’s right; Hermione turned around looking apprehensive, ‘However, that subject will continue under a new and revolutionary idea that I shall implement this term.

‘I have offered, and he has accepted, the job to Professor Snape, who has agreed to be part of a little triumvirate with myself.’

Harry stared around the hall; he and Hermione weren’t the only two looking astonished. A murmur of disapproval rang around among the students.

‘However,’ Dumbledore continued over the increasing din, ‘as I said, there will be another helping you study this subject. As both Professor Snape and I have our own jobs and commitments to attend to we will only be teaching you the theory. I have, instead, decided to delegate the task of *practical defence* to one of our students, should he accept it of course. A student who achieved a rather impressive score of 118% on his Defence Against The Dark Arts OWL last term, someone already practiced in teaching this subject. I delegate this task to Harry Potter, if he is willing of course.’

Harry froze, his features held in place as though glue had engulfed him. He stared at Hermione, beaming with unusual pride, and then to Ron, ogling him with an embarrassing level of awe tinged with a slight snarl. The other students were fixated on him, each looking expectantly in his direction.



‘What say you Harry,’ came Dumbledore’s voice echoing through the silence, ‘Will you assist Professor Snape and myself in providing your fellow students with an advanced level of defence?’

All the Gryffindors were nodding fervently; even the Hufflepuffs in the background were looking exited. Harry came to his senses, he didn’t seem to have much choice but he wanted one condition.

‘I will, Professor Dumbledore,’ Harry said standing up, ‘but I want one condition, sir.’

‘Its all right, Harry,’ Dumbledore said lightly, ‘Professor Snape has kindly consented to carry out all the Slytherin tuition personally. I have learned that some breaches are too vast to heal; I will not ask you to train those students you care so little for.’

Harry smiled at Dumbledore, who shot a strangely forceful look at the Slytherin table. It seemed that even he didn’t want the Slytherins trained up. Maybe he could lean on Snape to teach them badly.

‘This is great, Harry!’ Hermione sang as they left the Great Hall, ‘Just *wonderful!*’

‘Yeah, great,’ Ron said sulkily, he didn’t seem to impressed with Harry’s new position, ‘Just hope they pay you for it.’

‘Look, Ron,’ Harry said stopping and rounding on him, ‘I didn’t ask for these things. I never do, they just get pushed on me. But I’d have never been able to handle them all if it wasn’t for you and Hermione and I hope I can count on your help for this one. You’re experienced at this stuff, more advanced than the others I’ll be teaching. I’ll need your help to train so many people. You’re one of my big guns, I need you firing at my side not at my face.’

Ron went scarlet and looked at his shoes, ‘Sorry, mate. I know you don’t ask for it, or want it, but you still get it. Course I’ll help you. I’m being an idiot. Do you really thing I’m a big gun?’

‘Yeah I do. A cannon, maybe...’ Harry said with a smirk.

‘A cannon?’ Ron said catching on, ‘Cool.’

‘That was a really good thing you just did,’ Hermione said with a smile, she had hung back as Ron bounded up the staircase into the boys’ dormitory, ‘See you at breakfast. Night, Harry.’

She gave him a peck on the cheek, flushed furiously and skipped up the stairs to the dormitory leaving Harry wondering what he was getting himself into.

Harry slept badly that night. His dreams were plagued by bad images, images of Ron cackling in a high, shrill voice as he held the Quidditch Cup, the House Cup and his Head Boy badge over Hermione, who was gripping Harry’s Firebolt. She was motionless on the floor, a vague and vacant expression on her face, and a trace of green at a scar on her forehead. Her parents were there, blaming it all on Harry’s failure to send them eighty-seven boxes of Toothflossing Stringmints and Hermione’s copy of *Advanced Transfiguration*.

Harry awoke next morning with his scar prickling uncomfortably. He noticed it was the first time it had happened in ages, notable because it hadn’t hurt in weeks. He made for Professor Dumbledore after breakfast, determined after last year to report any strange dreams that left his scar in pain. He knew Voldemort could still break his mind.

Dumbledore listened to Harry’s story, his brow furrowed but his expression serene. As Harry finished he waited for a response and Dumbledore considered him for a moment before replying.

‘Voldemort clearly knows not only your mind but now your heart, too,’ Dumbledore said slowly, ‘Clearly, this is so important for him to know that he has entered your mind at great pain to himself. He knows the things you value most and was letting you know it. Perhaps he was testing you to see which image disturbed you the most.’

Harry’s heart sank and he felt suddenly very sick.

‘I think,’ Dumbledore continued, ‘that it is time you resumed Occlumency.’

‘No!’ Harry cried, ‘I cant! Snape always -,’

‘*Professor* Snape, Harry,’ Dumbledore said quietly.

‘Yeah, whatever,’ Harry replied, ‘he hurt me. Made my mind weaker. I can’t go to him again. I know you have your reasons for trusting him but I can’t. You understand don’t you?’

‘I do indeed, Harry,’ Dumbledore answered, ‘as I said last year. An old man’s mistake. No, I intend to teach you Occlumency myself. But perhaps I could test you against Professor Snape. Ask him to pretend to be Voldemort -,’

‘ – That shouldn’t be too hard –,’

‘Harry! Ask him to attack your mind as Voldemort might -,’

‘ – He’d love that -,’

‘Harry Potter, please! If you can learn to repel Professor Snape’s attempts to break your mind then Voldemort himself would struggle to crack you. Severus Snape is the most complete Occlumens/Legilimens I have ever met. And I include Tom Riddle in that.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Harry snorted, ‘everyone was using the Imperius Curse, weren’t they? S’pose Snape didn’t want to be following the crowd -,’

‘That’s quite enough, Harry,’ Dumbledore said sternly, ‘I will teach you Occlumency. If you wish to taunt Severus Snape then I’m afraid you are going to have to work hard and earn it.’

Harry didn’t think he’d ever heard a better motivational speech in his life.

## Chapter 7: Secrets and Lies

As first days of term go this one was up there with the most exhausting for Harry. The set up of the NEWT years meant that all lessons were now an hour and a half long and they now were in each class three times a week. Harry had decided to take Charms, Transfiguration, Defence Against The Dark Arts, Care of Magical Creatures (if only to see Hagrid regularly) and Potions, though quite how he scraped an 'Outstanding' grade to make it into that class was a matter of some conjecture.

Unluckily for Harry, Potions would be inflicted on him later that first day. It began with Care of Magical Creatures, followed by Charms and ending with the visit to Professor Snape. After breakfast, Harry led the way down to Hagrid's hut with Hermione trotting along at his side. Ron, who was again wearing his disgruntled look, loped along slightly behind them. Every time Harry turned to speak to him his eyes seemed to be in other directions, mostly where Hermione was walking, obviously concerned at her close proximity to Harry.

During the lesson, Hermione made a point of standing next to Harry so they could work in together as a pair. She smiled elatedly when paired with Harry and he had to shoot her a warning look and give a small nod at Ron, who had luckily turned away.

'Why do you keep doing things like that?' Harry breathed at her, 'Ron's suspicious enough already without you fanning the flames.'

'What's he got to be suspicious about?' she said shrewdly, her coy smile surprising Harry as it sent a tingle of electricity along his spine. Unfortunately, he didn't have an answer for Hermione's question. She, on the other hand, seemed to understand perfectly well Harry's concerns over Ron. She seemingly decided to become playful; Harry feeling it was as much to tease him as anything else. She stood so close during their pair work that Harry could see her skin twitch. Several times she brushed her foot against Harry's, wearing a cute, but maddeningly innocent, look every time he told her to stop it. She even ran her fingertips along the back of his hand once

of twice, promptly causing Harry to shiver all over and drop whatever he was holding.

Charms didn't improve the situation either. It soon became apparent that Hermione's covert teasing hadn't been very well concealed. Several of their classmates were casting them oddly suggestive looks, the girls in particular as they whispered behind their hands. Hermione blushed at the attention but was undeterred. Harry, who got quite enough attention without being the latest topic of romantic gossip, tried to sit away from her at a table with Ron. Harry should have learned then that a woman's will is not to be tested.

'Harry,' Hermione said airily and loud enough for the whole class to hear, 'are you going to come and sit next to me or do I have to use a Summoning Charm on you?'

Lavender and Parvati burst into a fit of spluttering giggles as Harry made his way across to Hermione. Professor Flitwick squeaked over the top of the giggling that he, himself, would like to see that charm, pointing out that using it successfully on an animal the size of a human was a particularly advanced skill.

At that moment, Harry really wanted to be angry with her, wanted to feel some resentment towards her for humiliating him in front of all the class. But he couldn't; he looked into her eyes and saw the things he had seen during the summer and the sensation was overpowering. Truth was, he *wanted* to sit next to Hermione, even after being embarrassed by her in front of all his friends.

Throughout the lesson Harry kept glancing at Ron, his thoughts consumed with the angry expression on his face. Hermione didn't seem to have noticed; as usual, she had mastered the charm of that lesson with consummate ease and proceeded to spend the remaining time twiddling her fingers around in her hair and fluttering her eyelids at Harry with a shameful over-exuberance. Every time she did this she laughed hard and clung onto his arm, comforting him that she was only playing.

'Yeah, well,' Harry said under his breath after one such fluttering, 'I don't think Ron is taking it as a joke. Look how angry he is.'

'I'll sort that out,' Hermione said, 'Watch this. And remember to play along.'

Hermione made quite an effort of looking over Harry's shoulder at Ron. She pushed Harry's head close to his parchment to make it look like he was working and made animated facial expressions in Ron's direction. Eventually, he looked up at her, his expression changing from mad to puzzled, to laughing. Harry snuck a glance at Hermione who was raising her eyebrows exaggeratedly, looking like she was trying to fight the giggles and pointing at Harry's back. He looked up at her and she stopped suddenly, as if she had been caught doing something. Ron wore the same look when he glanced at him, a strained expression as though trying not to laugh.

Then he understood. Hermione was trying to make it seem like she was playing with Harry for some kind of joke. It didn't seem a great idea but Ron seemed to have bought it totally. Harry couldn't shake the impression that Ron would have believed anything to ignore the possibility that what Hermione was doing was for real.

'Harry,' Ron said suppressing a smirk, 'Hermione's bag seems heavy there...why don't you carry it for her?'

'Yeah,' Dean Thomas added with a snigger, 'We've got Herbology after lunch, why don't you both join us and make daisy chains or something?'

'No, he can't,' Ron said in a voice of strained seriousness, 'they've got Potions. He might need an Anti-Whipped Draught or something.'

Dean snorted so loudly that several people voiced their disgust. Harry felt very red but still, if it distracted Ron it was a good plan. Hermione pointed out its brilliance soon after.

'I know it's a pain,' she said, before adding huskily, 'but at least now I can hold you and stuff without too much suspicion.'

The secrecy was starting to kill Harry. The pretence of what both he and Hermione seemed to feel for each other was tempered by some sort of non-verbal code that said they could neither mention

it to each other nor announce it to everyone else. Not that there would be anything to announce, they hadn't actually defined the new nature of their relationship. They just seemed to have fallen into a deeper state of intimacy.

Increasingly throughout the day, the real communication between them came from their eyes. For the rest of Charms, then through the lunch hour, Harry had to play along with Hermione's little joke on Ron, listening to him making suggestive comments that descended further and further into the vulgar and smutty. He put up with it by looking at Hermione for reassurance that she knew what she was doing. Eventually, Hermione put a stop to Ron's comments when Crookshanks was brought into the farce. Whether faked or not, Harry was glad of Hermione's naivety; he really didn't think she understood the true meaning of Ron's comments concerning Harry and her cat...

After lunch, Harry and Hermione parted with Ron at the Entrance Hall; they were heading down to Professor Snape's dungeon while Ron was off across the grounds to the Herbology greenhouses. Harry never knew what Ron's Potions OWL score was, taking his word that, 'mum would have sent me a howler if I'd been in school,' and leaving it at that.

As they parted, Harry felt a wave of relief that finally the pressure of keeping up the charade for Ron was finally off. This despite the knowledge that Snape was bound to round on him in class, no doubt telling everyone who'd listen his distaste and shock at Harry's OWL score. Hermione seemed pleased too; although she had let go of Harry's arm he sensed it was for his benefit only, at least in the full gaze of the rest of the school. She did, nevertheless, keep her vigil at his hip, brushing her hand against his as much as she could get away with. Harry was sure that, if she'd been free to, she would have snatched up his hand as quickly as she would a new textbook.

When Professor Snape breezed into the dungeon shortly after they'd arrived, Harry's feeling of dread returned. Snape seemed in a particularly vindictive mood and Harry was sure that he must always make this happen to Snape. Maybe it was like a reverse Patronus to him; he appeared to Snape and immediately made him volatile and

evil. He certainly seemed to have that effect on Uncle Vernon, could lightening really strike twice?

'Right,' Snape said, his voice icy as ever, 'As you are in my NEWT Potions class I can only assume you are the most proficient potion-makers in your year, though experience has taught me that this may not be much of a compliment, considering the abysmal potions I have been forced to grade for five years.'

'But, you all achieved an 'Outstanding' grade on your OWL papers so I can only assume that you must have some talent, though I make one obvious exception to this speculation.'

As surely as the sunrise, Snape's gaze flicked over to Harry and Malfoy, in the front row, turned around to snarl in what he must have thought was a menacing fashion.

'I must say, Potter, quite how you managed such a grade is quite unfathomable. For a while, I considered the possibility that Miss Granger may have brewed a Polyjuice Potion and sat the exam for you. But then I remembered, she wouldn't be able to procure the ingredients to brew such a potion, would she, Potter?'

'I wouldn't have thought so, sir,' Harry answered, in a would-be-innocent voice, his palms claming up profusely.

'This idea soon left my mind, however, as I remembered that, of course Mrs. Potter...I'm sorry, *Miss Granger*,' Malfoy sniggered hard, 'was unable to *turn time*.'

'I wouldn't have thought that either, *sir*,' Harry hissed.

What was Snape playing at? Why bring up things that happened long ago that he shouldn't even know about?

'I wish to impress on you, Mr. Potter,' Snape said as he swept across the dungeon to Harry, 'that although some may consider you a...now don't all laugh at once class...a *teacher*,' Malfoy took the chance to laugh first, longest and loudest, 'you are not to expect any special treatment from me. I have never treated your celebrity status as anything to warrant special consideration and Dumbledore



handing you this very undeserved new responsibility will not change my attitude to you.'

'What a surprise,' Harry retorted.

'You will still address me with the respect a senior teacher deserves, though you are to expect no such respect from me.'

'Wouldn't dream of it.'

'Good, the thought of you dreaming about me is a particularly disturbing and unpleasant one. Much like your woeful potion-making skills. Regardless of this oversight,' Snape said as he returned to his desk, 'we will be attempting to brew highly difficult, delicate and advanced potions in this class. So, I expect to find Potter way behind before we hit Hallowe'en. Inquiries for Potter's whereabouts when that happens can be sent to the Gryffindor girls' dormitory, I'm sure they will find him from there,' the Slytherins at the front bawled with hysterical laughter.

'Today we will be brewing veritaserum, a truth potion. The brewing procedure depends intrinsically on the lunar cycle, so any errors today will ruin your work for the next month in this class. Do you want to copy that down, Potter? Before we begin, I must make something clear to all of you. Despite Miss Granger's obvious enthusiasm for them, we shall not be brewing Love Potions in this classroom,' he swung a snide glance at Hermione and her eyes fell to her cauldron, heavy and humiliated. Harry wanted to insult Snape with incredible ferocity, but Dumbledore's words rang in his ears. He resolved to work doubly hard, not only in his Occlumency to earn the right to abuse Snape to his face, but also in Potions to give Snape as little ammunition for his own insults as possible.

The common room was filling up steadily as Harry and Hermione met there after depositing their bags in the dormitories. They hadn't mentioned Potions once, neither seemed to have the words to break the dense awkwardness that had sprouted up between them. It was getting to a pretty desperate stage, Harry had decided, when they couldn't even conceal what they were feeling from the teachers, how could they possibly hope to hoodwink the students, and Ron in particular.

Ron, himself, was nowhere to be found; he had been called to see Professor McGonagall after his Herbology lesson and hadn't been seen since. Harry had the fleeting thought that maybe he had been told about Snape's assault in Potions and was off sulking somewhere. Ginny mentioned seeing him chatting to Luna as he made his way towards McGonagall's office but there had been no sighting since then. The reason for his disappearance became apparent on the way to dinner and Harry, for his part, was elated. It would distract Ron for a considerable time.

'Harry! HARRY!' Ron yelled as he bounded down the stairs after he and Hermione, 'You are never going to guess what's happened. I can't believe it!'

'What? What is it?' Harry asked, rapt.

'Well, McGonagall sent a message for me to go see her after my lesson,' Ron said, panting, 'Anyway, I went up there and guess what? Don't bother, you never will. Well, you know Angelina Johnson left last year? Well, McGonagall called me into her office to ask me to be...wait for it...the new Gryffindor Quidditch Captain! Isn't it amazing!'

'Wow!' Harry said astonished, but also with the sudden leaden feeling of inadequacy that he had felt at Grimmauld Place when he discovered he hadn't been chosen to be a prefect, 'Well done, mate! That's fantastic!'

'Isn't it?' Ron beamed, 'I had to make a sacrifice though.'

'Really?' asked Hermione, 'Like what? Did she stop you being a prefect?'

Harry wished she had concealed her hopefulness a little better.

'No,' said Ron sounding slightly affronted, 'She gave me a choice: Quidditch Captain or Head Boy next year. No contest really, is there? She said something about Dumbledore having someone else in mind from Gryffindor for Head Boy. Hey...its probably you!'

'I doubt it,' Harry said, the lead rising on the wings of hope, 'But if it is, don't get mad!'

'Get mad!' Ron cried, 'Why would I be mad? I'd take Quidditch Captain over Head Boy any day. The job's yours if you want it. I wouldn't...Fred and George would never let me live it down. Anyway, now that I'm Captain I've already started thinking about changes to the line up. Luckily, Katie and Alicia are still here, but they'll have to be replaced when they leave next year. I thought I'd bump Ginny up to Chaser, she prefers playing as one anyway, and drag you back on as Seeker. What d'you reckon?'

Harry reckoned that dinner that night would taste sweeter than it ever had before.

## Chapter 8: No News is Good News

It was with an acceptable degree of trepidation that Harry approached Tuesday morning. It would, after all, be the first day he had taught a class as a recognised teacher. Dumbledore had taken him to one side at dinner last night to tell him that although Dumbledore himself was taking the class, that he, Harry, would be his assistant for the lesson. Harry wasn't tremendously keen on this idea; every time he thought about it he imagined himself as a 'magician's assistant' and hoped truly that Dumbledore wouldn't make him wear a sparkly dress in front of his classmates.

Harry descended the boy's dormitory earlier than usual, his thoughts about parading around in high-heeled shoes and a bouffant wig kept his from drifting back to sleep. He was surprised to find Hermione, sitting alone in the sparsely populated common room. She jumped up as she saw him, realised that she was making a show of herself, and then approached him in a casual way.

'Morning,' she said breathlessly.

'Hi,' Harry beamed back.

'Look, about yesterday,' she began, Harry got the feeling she'd been planning this speech all night, 'I'm really sorry about what happened. It started off as a bit of fun and got out of hand. I didn't mean to embarrass you in every class and in front of anyone we came across.'

'It's all right,' Harry said brightly, 'No harm done. It would have been funny if I'd been on the other side. Don't worry about it.'

'Yeah, well I do,' she said seriously, 'I don't want to cause problems for you. I think we need to talk, define what's going on with...you know, *us* and stuff.'

'What do you mean?' Harry asked suspiciously, he had a distinct feeling that Hermione wasn't about to tell him something he wanted to hear.

'Well, I think we need to be clear about it all. What's going on here, what was happening at my house. Stuff like that. Maybe we need to set some boundaries.'

'If you want me to back off I will,' Harry said, suddenly feeling quite angry, 'It's not as if major stuff is happening is it? Apart from you having a joke at my expense. I thought you were doing that to start Ron from moping, but...I don't know, maybe you were just messing around with me.'

'No, Harry! That's not what...I didn't mean that —'

'Just forget it Hermione,' Harry shot, his face fuming with frustration, 'I'm going down to breakfast. Tell Ron I'm there wont you?'

'Harry! Wait! Please come back!'

But Harry didn't come back. He stormed straight out of the portrait hole, kicking over a game of wizard's chess two second-years were playing. They yelled their anger at him but he found that he was not at all sorry and for a moment, he felt like cursing them for their insolence. He did manage to restrain himself from that though, but as he stomped down to breakfast the anger in his chest intensified.

Harry was hoping for a good half an hour stewing time before anyone came down to breakfast. The Great Hall was empty bar a few students who were up and poring over textbooks, Hermione-style, as they ate their way through a variety of foods. Harry thought that by the time anyone sat with him he would be nice and riled, ready to bite off multiple heads, scold anyone who tried to be nice and calm him down and, most importantly, beat Hermione in the argument they were bound to have.

This was however a false hope for barely ten seconds after he'd sat down Hermione was slamming herself down next to him. Her eyes were slightly puffy and bloodshot and Harry had difficulty deciding whether this was through anger or if she had been crying. He hated himself; the thought of her being angry didn't bother him but when it occurred to him that he may of upset her his anger melting to horrific, gut-wrenching guilt. What is she doing to me? This was the one, single thought circulating in his mind.

'Listen, Harry,' Hermione began determinedly, 'I know you're angry but you are going to hear me out. You've got the wrong end of the stick about what I said upstairs. If you'd ever let me finish a sentence maybe we wouldn't cross wires so often.'

'You sounded perfectly clear to me,' Harry said quietly.

'No, I didn't!' Hermione said, her voice getting quite agitated, 'Look, what I meant was that we need to talk. We need time, on our own, away from everyone else. We need to sort out what's happening with us. I know some things have changed between us, and I know you feel it too, but it's all so difficult, so confusing. Are you going to say you aren't confused?'

Harry wanted to say 'yes' with such force, but he couldn't lie.

'Yeah, I'm confused,' Harry said lightly, 'but with you. One minute you're all huggy and clingy, then you're cold telling me to back off. This is scary for me, you know...I've never, well...felt...some of this stuff, like this...you know. But if you don't want to be near me, or if you want to be near someone else and have a joke about me, then just say and stopped doing this to me.'

'Doing what to you?'

Harry paused for a second.

'Making me weak...'

Hermione seemed taken aback, her face softened slightly and she looked sorry.

'What do you mean?'

'Weak, Hermione,' Harry explained, 'I see you and things happen to me, I can't explain it. It's weird, it's scary...it's definitely strong. But, well, it's quite nice too. Like I said, if you'd rather not be near me...'

'That's my point, Harry,' Hermione said animatedly, 'I do want to be near you. All the time. That's what I meant about boundaries.'

How close we can get, what's acceptable and stuff. We need to sort out what we are, and if anything's going on with us then we have to decide how to break it to...um, *certain people*.'

Harry looked around to see Ron strolling over. Luna was pestering him again, ambling along dreamily by his side and they chatted. Obviously, Harry mused, Ron couldn't think of a good enough excuse to get rid of her.

'That girl,' Ron said exasperatedly, 'talks and talks. Could talk for Britain that one. And I wish she'd stop singing 'Weasley is Our King' everywhere she goes. It's really annoying.'

Once breakfast was over Harry, Ron and Hermione made their way to Transfiguration. Harry purposely made sure that he and Hermione were on different sides to Ron, and the situation seemed to make him much happier. It talked and talked about his Quidditch Captaincy, talking very fast about how Ginny was going to help him train to be the best Keeper Hogwarts had ever seen. Strangely, he invited Hermione to go and watch him train but Harry didn't get a mention.

Hermione didn't seem particularly keen either to listen to Ron nor accept his invitation for her to be his own personal cheering section. Harry looked at her as infrequently as his desire would allow and every time he did she looked bored and slightly upset. Harry felt exactly the same.

They passed a group of Ravenclaws huddled at the top of the staircase. Roger Davies, the tall, moderately good-looking Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain had just told a joke to which his audience were now rapturously laughing. Harry caught the eye of Cho Chang, who immediately began to laugh louder and more exuberantly as the others' laughter began to wane. Some of the group gave her strange looks, worried that she might be mental.

Harry couldn't help but be reminded of Malfoy in yesterday's Potions class. He thought about telling a joke himself, maybe to impress Hermione. A strange sensation hit him; he didn't really want to impress Hermione. Merely having her at his side with everyone knowing she was his would have been more than enough for him. This simple thing, however, seemed so unlikely at that point that

Harry actually rubbed his chest. The pain shouldn't have been physical, should it?

The first Transfiguration lesson of the new term was particularly tricky. Professor McGonagall, much like Snape, reminded that class that high grade got them into the class and a maintaining of those standards was a must for all those wanting to stay there. The task for the lesson was difficult and tricky, requiring a precise wand swish and an incantation muttered with exact phonetic accuracy. Despite being in a slightly off mood with her, Harry felt a strange swelling of pride when Hermione was the only one doing it correctly. It paled into comparison with his own, rather poor effort. His mind juts wasn't on the job.

After break Harry parted with Hermione as she went off to Arithmancy and he went down to Care of Magical Creatures with Ron. Hermione had somehow managed to convince Professor McGonagall to allow her to attend only one Care of Magical Creatures class and spend the next two classes in Arithmancy. Harry doubted she would struggle with this extra lesson and was willing to help her catch up if she needed him to. Not that he expected her to ask.

Ron seemed to have been waiting for this moment for ages. As soon as Hermione mouthed Harry a wordless goodbye, and gave a solemn little wave, Ron burst into talk.

'So, you and Hermione,' he said quickly, 'what's going on? Tell me, I want to know.'

Ron seemed very agitated; Harry thought it best not to reveal anything to incriminating.

'Nothing,' he said, 'Why d'you ask?'

'Don't give me that *nothing* rubbish,' he said hotly, 'you two are acting totally weird. If one of you is moody, then the other one is. You talk in hushed tones all the time. And I'm surprised neither of you walk into stuff with the amount of time you spend looking at each other. Don't lie to me, Harry.'



'I'm not!' Harry said loudly, Ron's eyes widened, 'Nothings going on. I've had this for two years now and I wish people would drop it. She's not interested in me and that's the end of it. What have I got to do?'

'So she's not interested in you,' Ron said slowly, 'but what about you? Cho's out of the way so where're you're interests?'

'I don't have any. Ron, this is *Hermione*. We're just friends. That's all there is to it.'

Harry hated the lie before he'd even finished it. His interest was elsewhere, that much Ron had got right. He couldn't see any way to tell him what he was truly feeling.

'That's OK then,' Ron said after a brief silence, 'because you know what I said in the summer? I'm interested in seeing if I can get her. I mean, I know she hasn't shown much interest yet but I have to prove I can do something if I put my mind to it. I don't want to have to compete with you, Harry; I mean, you've had enough upsets. I don't want to go chasing after Hermione if you really fancy her. But you don't, so it's a clear field.'

'Yeah,' Harry said vaguely, 'Yeah, I s'pose it is.'

Lunch was a sombre affair. Harry poked and prodded at his bowl of pasta swirls but didn't fancy eating much of it. Hermione, who had looking positively radiant after what she had termed an 'exhilarating' Arithmancy class, had turned quite despondent after seeing the look on Harry's face as they met up in the Great Hall. Ron seemed to take a sadistic advantage of Harry's depressed mood and tried to chat to Hermione as much as he could between mouthfuls of shepherd's pie. She kept shooting concerned glances at Harry who was reduced to meeting her gaze on one or two occasions and shaking his head, hoping he had communicated to her that he didn't want to talk.

This wasn't something that he could keep up for any period of time, though. As soon as lunch was over the three of them trooped back up to Gryffindor tower to collect their bags and head for the Defence Against The Dark Arts classroom. Harry went on ahead after Hermione had tried to pull him to one side, undoubtedly wanting to

know what had happened to depress him so much in Care of Magical Creatures. He didn't want to discuss it with her, but couldn't look her in the eye when he said that Dumbledore had asked him to be in class five minutes early.

When he arrived, the classroom was empty apart from Professor Dumbledore, who was sat in a chair.

'Hello, Harry!' he said jovially as Harry entered the room, 'Something troubling you.'

'No,' Harry lied.

'I'll ask you again tomorrow,' Dumbledore said, inspecting Harry over his half-moon glasses, 'I have scheduled your first Occlumency lesson with me for tomorrow evening at 8pm. In my study would be best, I think. Perhaps then I can get to the root of the problem.'

'What problem?' Harry asked, trying to sound casual.

'The one that has been on your mind for weeks, Harry. I have several theories already, perhaps one will turn out to be accurate. I have managed to accumulate knowledge on many of the troubles that youth faces, though, maybe, your particular problem may be slightly acute?'

'That's an understatement,' Harry said, flopping down in a chair opposite his Headmaster.

'Then perhaps we shall discuss the problem tomorrow, see if we can't find a solution.'

Harry wasn't hopeful. Dumbledore was gifted in solving most of both Harry's and the wizarding world's problems. But, somehow, Harry didn't think Dumbledore could possibly say anything that could help him here.

The Defence Against The Dark Arts class was full of surprises for Harry. Luckily, Harry wasn't made to wear a dress to be Dumbledore's assistant but he was shocked at the contents of the

NEWT level syllabus that Dumbledore had devised. Harry felt certain that if Dolores Umbridge had cast her eyes over this she would have spontaneously combusted from the shock.

Dumbledore had clearly decided to take a hard line in the face of Voldemort's resurgence. Instead of reading the techniques for spotting vampires, werewolves and hags, Dumbledore had decided on an almost militaristic training programme. He explained that the students were to be taught all the hexes, jinxes and curses they would need to defend themselves against dark wizards. He explained that they would also be taught the basics of stealth and concealment, should they ever need to hide or disguise themselves when in danger. He added that he and Harry would demonstrate each one in class before Harry took a totally practical class in the final lesson of the week. He also hinted that he and Harry would duel so they could fight like true wizards do, going beyond the confines of incantations.

'But, sir,' Harry said sceptically, trying not to plead, 'I can't duel with you. Not like Voldemort did. I can't do any of that stuff.'

'Then you shall have to learn,' Dumbledore said with a smile, 'and I have faith that you will. The power is within you, Harry, and though that kind of duelling is very advance, you have already demonstrated that you are ahead of you years in that department.'

Harry doubted very much that this was true. But to duel with Dumbledore? Harry felt angry again; why did all the people he cared for seem to want to humiliate him in public these days?

Harry's humiliation didn't end with the end of classes for the day. It rapidly became apparent as Harry, Hermione and Ron made their way down to dinner that evening that they had missed something going on. In the corridors, people were huddled together in groups, laughing and chatting over what looked like a small newspaper. As these people saw Harry and Hermione, they starting whooping, whistling suggestively and some even making the kind of comments Ron was prone to yesterday.

'What's going on?' Hermione asked anxiously as several fourth-year boys made suggestive gestures aimed at her and Harry.

Harry didn't have an answer but Draco Malfoy did. He was loitering around the entrance to the Great Hall and as he saw Harry his face lit up with a mischievous, evil glow.

'There you are, Potty,' he said in a drawl, 'have you seen the news?'

'The what?' Harry spat.

'News, Potter? You know, stories about things going on in the world? Anyway, take a look at this.'

He thrust one of the mini-newspapers into Harry's hands.

'What's this?'

'This, is the new Hogwarts newsletter. Funded by my father and run by yours truly. Take a look at it, Potter, see if you can find anything you *like*, though I doubt you will. And check out the competitions page, some very interesting prizes to be won. You have a look, too, Weasley. There's galleons up for grabs and you are in the prime position to take them. That's if I'd give them to you anyway.'

He walked away laughing; Crabbe and Goyle, who'd been just inside the Great Hall, laughed as well as the followed Malfoy to the Slytherin table. Harry turned over the paper he was holding. His face dropped like a ton of stone.

### *The Slytherin Standard:*

#### *Taking The Hiss Out Of Life At Hogwarts*

Harry felt a degree of dread but curiosity forced him to read on.

Welcome Hogwarts students to the new Slytherin Standard, the place to find all you need to know about the goings on of your school. Hot topic today: Potter and Granger, the joke of Hogwarts. This little sickening tryst has been in action for quite some time but now it seems they have come out into the open. Masks to block out the sickening displays of 'affection' may be obtained from Pansy Parkinson, c/o Slytherin House.

*This alliance is sure to cause many sleepless nights for the decent students at our school. Only this morning, one student (who wishes to remain anonymous), Gregory Goyle, disclosed to me that thoughts about Potty Potter and the Mudblood before bed causing him to wake up with the most terrible nausea imaginable. Madame Pomfrey can testify to his visits to the hospital wing, suffering from severe symptoms of 'Mud-blood poisoning.*

*POTTER SPOTTERS: The Boy Who Shouldn't Have Lived leaving a very smelly boys bathroom; Potter stealing underwear from the girls laundry room; Potter and the Weasel King throwing dungbombs at the school's mentally-handicapped visitors. SEND YOUR POTTER SIGHTINGS TO DRACO MALFOY, THE EDITOR, SLYTHERIN COMMON ROOM.*

*COMPETITION TIME! This week's special prizes are as follows. 5 Galleons for insulting the Gryffindor Hide-And-Seeker in front of ten or more witnesses. 10 Galleons for sending Potter to the hospital wing; 20 Galleons for serious maiming or loss of limbs. SPECIAL OFFER!!!! 50 Galleons for any student who can make that no-good, know-it-all, Mudblood Granger cry in the Great Hall. RULES: No redheaded Gryffindors will be permitted to enter; your thirst for any money is desperate enough so you can do without ours. We are NOT a charity.*

Harry stared at the paper for a moment, wondering whether it was all just a bad dream. Ron abruptly snatched the paper from his hands, tearing it into pieces with such a look of violence in his eyes that Harry felt inclined to step backwards. He felt Hermione slip her hand into his then without warning, and in full view of Ron, she buried her face into his shoulder.

Harry could feel her weeping quietly, unable to move her head. Ron saw but didn't react; he simply nodded maniacally in cold fury and muttered such threats about what he was going to do to Malfoy that Harry couldn't respond to. Having lost all appetite, Harry guided Hermione away to the front doors, planning a walk around the lake. Ron stopped him.

'Where do you think you're going?' he yelled.

'I don't think it's a great idea to go in there yet,' Harry said, trying to be calm, 'I'm going to take Hermione outside. We'll eat when it's a bit less crowded.'

'Running away are you?' he spat.

'Ron, look at her. You want me to take her in there? Past *them*? How many Slytherins will try to claim the 50 Galleons prize for making her cry?'

Ron conceded defeat.

'Look, if you want to go in, then go,' Harry said, 'but promise me one thing. Don't kill Malfoy unless I'm there to watch you do it.'

## Chapter 9: The Pain and the Pensieve

Harry spent most of the next day watching his step wherever he went. He was conscious of many people, surprisingly not just the Slytherins, watching his every move, waiting, perhaps, for a chance to inflict some horrific injury upon him. He developed a habit of walking down the staircases with his back against the wall, deciding that here was the most opportune place for someone to harm him and make it look like an accident.

Peeves the Poltergeist seemed to be hovered around Harry wherever he went. He knew that Peeves would have no need for the Galleons Malfoy was offering for a demise in Harry's health, but he got the feeling that he was doing it out of mischievous spite. This reason was soon rebuffed, though, as Harry discovered the truth behind his own personal poltergeist shadow.

It appeared that the teachers had found out about Malfoy's new publishing venture but were apparently powerless to stop it. However, the students were canny enough to realise that if Harry were to suddenly come down with a nasty bout of broken bones and various plagues, and particular students became quickly wealthy, then fingers would start to be pointed. Instead, people were trying to find ways around this problem and Peeves seemed only too willing to help out.

For the mere fee of being allowed to cause more mayhem than usual, Peeves was available to follow Harry around for any length of time. He would try his mirthless best to make Harry trip over stray obstacles that miraculously found their way into his path, fall down stairs if he wasn't concentrating, slip over puddles of water from flooded bathrooms or dodge unceremoniously out of the way of falling suits of armour and statues that happened to topple over as he passed. Many times, Harry spotted herds of students crowded around corners, heads popping out to see if he had been injured, vociferous curses echoing down the corridors each time he escaped unharmed.

He had also taken to walking about alone. This served at least two good purposes. Firstly, the insulting-in-front-of-ten-witnesses prize was the easiest to attain, so Harry didn't want to make the

target crowd any less. At breakfast, he hurried into the Great Hall, looked apologetically at Hermione as she moved up to let Harry sit by her, and then raced into the boy's bathroom to eat a few slices of toast alone in one of the cubicles.

The second purpose was Hermione herself. She seemed to have taken a great personal insult the insinuations targeted at her relationship with Harry. They had walked around the lake several times after first reading the *Slytherin Standard* yesterday but she had quickly let go of Harry's hand and withdrawn herself from him. They hadn't spoken much; Harry made several uncertain attempts to get Hermione to speak her mind but she had shushed him and got rather moody.

It had been the same in the morning. Despite offering him a seat next to her at breakfast, Harry wouldn't have said that the look she wore was either enticing or welcoming. Instead, he got the feeling that Hermione considered all the unwanted attention she was getting was somehow his fault. He didn't argue the point with her; he was too preoccupied with his own safety rather than giving Hermione an easy task of shouting her head off at him.

Ron's behaviour was perhaps the most bizarre. Despite his apparent unease at any show of affection between Harry and Hermione, the story about them in the newsletter didn't seem to have made an impact on him. Harry assumed that he was more murderous over the comments about him, and Ginny, on the competitions page. The lack of money in Ron's family was a particular sensitive point with him, one bound to send him sour without much trouble. Surprisingly, he seemed supportive of Harry and Hermione's relationship, as it had been portrayed in the paper. Harry felt that the negative slant given to the relationship might have found a comfortable place in Ron's heart.

It was with some degree of horror that Harry realised what his timetable of lessons meant for the day. Double Potions followed by Double Defence Against The Dark Arts. In short, three hours of unabridged, inescapable, insufferable Snape. It didn't help, when Ron vanished towards the Herbology greenhouses, that Hermione's unfathomable mood was still well and truly in force.



‘Shall we go down to Potions then?’ Harry asked sheepishly as he met Hermione in the Entrance Hall.

‘S’pose,’ she said coldly, turning on her heel and striding down towards the dungeons.

‘What have I done?’ Harry asked as he jogged up behind her.

‘Nothing, Harry! She snapped, ‘Just leave m...leave *it* alone.’

Harry felt like a red-hot poker had been stabbed through his chest and sandpaper scratched over his face. He stopped, watching Hermione as she strode on down the steps, not stopping once to turn back. He felt hollow, sick, confused...and very much alone.

He entered the dungeons and, after taking one look at Hermione’s face, decided to sit on the opposite side of the room to where she was. He looked at her; for a fraction of a moment she looked like she felt guilty, as if she was going to say something...maybe apologise, or explain herself. Then she seemed to think better of it and snapped her head away from him.

It was to Harry’s dismay, though not great surprise, that he found the walls of Snape’s dungeon had been redecorated. Some of the jars containing slimy, pickled things had been removed and, along the brickwork elsewhere, the exposed walls had been covered with multiple copies of a publication that he thought might just drive him to murder, or suicide. Dozens of copies of the *Slytherin Standard* had been pasted up all around the place so that dozens of moving pictures of Harry’s face, distorted by magical tampering, leered down at him. He wanted to look at Hermione, hoping maybe for some support in the face of this but then, he thought; she was probably laughing at him along with everyone else.

Snape swept soundlessly into the dungeon as soon as everyone was present. He had an almost benign look on his face, his gaze floating around the dungeon walls, then to the Slytherins in the front row; clearly, he was looking for their approval on his new-look classroom.

‘You may have noticed,’ he began silkily, ‘that the dungeon had been redecorated. I have come to realise that pressure may not be the best atmosphere in which your atrocious work will thrive. Therefore, I have added some colour to the dungeon, some light entertainment for the enjoyment of this class. I am sure you will all take as much pleasure from this as I have. Keep up the excellent work, Mr Malfoy.’

Snape beckoned the class to continue brewing the vertiaserum potion. With a sweep of his wand something happened to the many Harry’s staring down from the walls. They began to speak and Harry was reminded very much of the life-sized poster of himself that Fred and George Weasley had bewitched the year before. This time, however, the pictures did not shout abuse about Dolores Umbridge and the Ministry of Magic. Instead, various Harry’s could be heard shouting out such things as, ‘don’t brew a potion like I do, you’ll get detention,’ and ‘don’t forget! Pain Means Prizes!’ Harry stared into his cauldron, his fists shaking with suppressed rage, his eyeballs hot and moist as he tried to concentrate.

The potion was not going well. Harry couldn’t shake the multitudes of his own voice shouting obscenities at him that were becoming increasingly more personal. Coupled with the Slytherins new tact of imitating the posters and Hermione’s ignorance of him, Harry was a wreck. Not the best shape for a potion-maker to brew in.

‘Hmm, Potter,’ Snape hissed scathingly as he viewed the contents of Harry’s cauldron, ‘the mixture should be a milky grey colour at this time. Could you please describe the colour of your potion please.’

Harry muttered something silently.

‘So the class can hear, Potter,’ Snape simpered, ‘you are, after all, a teacher so you should have no qualms about disclosing the colour of your potion. Now say it again for us all, there’s a good little boy.’

‘Orange,’ Harry huffed. He heard a voice, unmistakably Hermione’s, give a sympathetic ‘oh!’ somewhere in the din of laughter that was ringing in his ears.

‘Should I vanish it now?’ Snape taunted, ‘or just wait a few more weeks. Lord knows we could all do with a laugh. Potter, you are truly lamentable in this class. Granger, show your boyfriend how he’s getting this wrong. I have no time for him.’

Hermione hurried over and began adding things to Harry’s potion at an incredible rate. She looked around every so often at the class, a look of surprising anger pulsating across the creases in her forehead.

‘I’m sorry, Harry,’ she mumbled, ‘I’m sorry I’m treating you like this. It’s just me, it really is. I’m starting to know how it must feel to be you. Everyone looking, talking, pointing. I don’t like it; I don’t know how you put up with it. I’m not surprised you get so angry sometimes. I know I would.’

‘I know you *are*,’ Harry said sharply.

Harry was surprised to see Hermione wear an agreeing sort of look. Somewhere over her shoulder Snape was discussing ideas for the next spot of Harry bashing with Malfoy. Then Hermione did something unexpected; she put her arms around Harry’s neck and drew him into a hug. She didn’t say anything as members of the class sniggered at them. Harry hugged her back, feeling at that moment that as long as he was like this he could face anything. Then, just as unexpectedly, she let go and went back to her cauldron, slightly flushed but saying nothing.

‘Not very good at holding onto them are you?’ Malfoy sneered when Hermione had gone.

‘Yeah, but at least I choose nice ones to hang on to,’ Harry spat, glancing down at Malfoy’s arm as it slipped around Pansy Parkinson’s waist.

‘To each his own,’ Malfoy said icily, ‘but I, unlike you, have animal magnetism. You merely have certain animal odours. So what can you say?’

Harry spluttered with his first laugh for days.

, 'If you say so,' he laughed, 'but you, unlike me, have a small –

'Potter, I will not tolerate that language in my classroom!' thundered Snape.

'I was going to say "threshold for pain", sir,' Harry lied. Pansy Parkinson wore a distinctive look of apprehensive inquisitiveness.

By the end of the day, Harry was pretty glad that it was over. The Defence Against The Dark Arts class with Snape was a struggle; he was sure that Snape demonstrating a variety of hexes on an unarmed Harry, before eventually allowing him to defend himself, would have been frowned upon by Dumbledore. Still, as Harry wound his way carefully to Dumbledore's office at 6pm for his Occlumency lesson, he felt that being alone was the best way for him.

Harry found Dumbledore ready and waiting for him. His broad smile was like phoenix tears to Harry's soul; he felt that no matter how hard a time he was given elsewhere in the school, this was one place he would be safe from acid tongues.

'Tough day, Harry?' Dumbledore asked pleasantly.

'I've had better,' Harry said wearily.

'I believe a certain newsletter is circulating among the students,' Dumbledore said, 'is this the reason for day of such trials?'

'It hasn't helped.'

'And, perhaps, the reason for your angst in my class yesterday?'

Harry didn't answer, merely sighed dejectedly and stared out the window.

'Enough, Harry. Onto Occlumency. First things first; I want us to have a level playing field in this class from here on in. When, last year, Professor Snape attempted, with an alarming lack of success,

to teach you this discipline he had a great advantage over you Harry. Do you know what that was?’

‘He’s better than me, stronger than me, more of an evil git than me?’ Harry speculated.

‘Well,’ for a second Harry thought Dumbledore was going to agree with him, a flickering twinkle in his eye, ‘no, Harry, that isn’t it. He had an implement that removed from his mind, those points which make it most vulnerable for attack. Those memories which resonate with more powerful emotion, whether for good or bad, are more accessible than those more deeply hidden. He had one of these,’ Dumbledore pointed to a box on his desk, ‘and I wish you to have one also.’

He opened the box and removed a deep stone dish carved with runes and symbols along the outside. Harry recognised it as once as a Pensieve.

‘I thought only you had one,’ Harry said, startled, ‘I thought Snape had borrowed yours.’

‘No, no,’ Dumbledore smiled, ‘Pensieves are as available as Foe-Glasses, Gobstones and sherbet lemons. *Professor* Snape owns his own Pensieve. All serious Occlumens and Legilimens will own one. Like I said, they removed those memories that would provide a weak point to a mind’s defence.’

‘And why do you want me to have one?’

‘Well, Harry, you have more problems and worries than any student to have ever passed through this school. As well as worries over homework and sports performance, you also have to deal with the problems of growing up, of developing relationships, physical changes. Add to that your confrontations with Lord Voldemort, your celebrity status and the attention it brings, the death of Sirius, the prophecy and the struggles you are now encountering with one particular friend of yours and I would say, yes, that you have just enough thoughts in your mind to spark a mental collapse! If ever there was a person in need of siphoning off some thoughts, it is you Harry. Now, shall we begin?’

Harry entered the Gryffindor common room an hour later clutching the Pensieve, his body shimmying after his Occlumency lesson. He sat down on the long couch in front of the fire. Ron was poring over his Transfiguration homework; Hermione was buried in the pages of *New Theory of Numerology*. She crossed the room to sit next to him, a look of concern, somewhat reluctantly, falling across her face.

‘Are you OK, Harry,’ she asked as a hand tentatively reached out, her worry now no longer concealed, ‘How was Occlumency?’

‘I still don’t like it,’ he mumbled, his hands trembling over the Pensieve, ‘Dumbledore made me relive happy memories, not bad ones like Snape did. It was worse somehow, I don’t know...maybe with what’s going on...’

He stopped himself and his eyes flickered over Hermione’s face. She looked pained and so terribly guilty that Harry looked away from her. Harry excused himself and made for bed.

‘Harry, don’t go, not yet, maybe we can talk,’ Hermione said.

‘No, not now, I don’t feel like it. Plus we can’t have any privacy.’

Harry sent a lofty nod over towards Ron who, though pretending to look at his homework, was obviously listening to them.

‘Look,’ Hermione said quietly, ‘I’ll pretend to go to bed too. We can nip up to your dormitory instead, throw on you Invisibility Cloak and go for a walk. By the Lake again. It’ll be nice by the moonlight...’

Harry didn’t think he had much choice. He dropped the Pensieve off on his bedside table, it was already swirling around with a few thoughts he’d dropped in it in Dumbledore’s office, took out his father’s old cloak and slung it around himself and Hermione. Together they set off on a nighttime sojourn with Harry trying not to enjoy too much being so close to the body that invaded his dreams.

## Chapter 10: Hermione's Boggart

'Expelled!' Harry exclaimed. He couldn't quite believe it.

'Yep,' said Ron calmly, though it looked like unbridled joy was waiting to spring forth from his chest.

'Malfoy, *expelled!*' Harry liked to keep saying it, it wasn't really sinking in and it sounded so much better out loud.

The events that had transpired during the morning had flown past in such a blur that it had felt like a dream, the best one Harry could remember. The news had been shifted from person to person at incredible speed, even by Hogwarts standards. The upshot was that when all the speculation was over and the dust had settled on the matter the one outstanding fact still remained: Draco Malfoy had been expelled from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

It turned out that Malfoy had been the instigator of his own downfall. The Slytherin Standard had been closed down immediately after his expulsion owing to, according to Ron's information, what the teachers called 'unnecessary and inappropriate' remarks about certain students and 'utterly unacceptable' requests for violence in exchange for money.

'The tried to get Snape out, too,' Ron added, 'said he should have known about it and should have demanded to see a copy before it went out. Not that it would have made much difference; I heard what he did to his Potions classroom.'

'Yeah,' Harry remarked absently, 'bet they're all gone now though. How did everyone find out? How come they didn't know in the first place?'

'Well,' Ron explained, 'everyone thought the teachers *did* know, that's why people didn't want to make it look like you'd been hurt on purpose if you ended up in the hospital wing. Someone, probably Malfoy, started the rumour that a teacher had said it would look suspicious if you got weirdly hurt. Then again, maybe Snape realised it and told Malfoy to spread it around. Knew it'd look bad on him.'

‘Anyway, remember last year when we were all banned from reading your interview in *The Quibbler*? Remember how everyone bewitched the pages to make it look like notes and stuff? Well, that’s what that scumbag did to that competitions page,’ Ron said this last bit with particular malice, ‘so none of the teachers knew any different. They saw what was written about...well, you know...those things about you and Hermione, but they thought the insults were out, damage done and not much they could do about it. As soon as they knew about the hidden bit of the magazine they went nuts. Malfoy was gone before 10pm last night.’

‘Do you know how they found out? Did someone tell them?’ Hermione asked, her eyes bright and glowing.

‘I’m getting to that,’ Ron said, ‘Apparently Dumbledore found out somehow. Dunno how, maybe he saw through the spell or something. Anyway, I heard that he was totally furious, absolutely mental. Scared some of the Slytherins in their common room by just walking in. He must radiate fear when he gets angry. He called for Malfoy, told him to pack his things and that he was out.

‘He had Lucius Malfoy there before Draco was packed and told him that there was no way he would let that kind of stuff go on, something about a little rivalry that Malfoy had taken way too far. He was heard to have said that he would not tolerate any student being threatened either in private or in public and that he didn’t want Malfoy back in school while he was Headmaster. And that was that; gone. Great or what?’

‘Wonder how he found out though?’ Hermione pondered, ‘I know he’s clever but it would have to be a pretty amazing guess to just know like that. How could he have seen it?’

Then Harry had a brainwave.

‘I showed him!’ he cried, ‘I must have. In Occlumency last night. I was thinking about that when we started the lesson, we’d been talking about it. He must have seen the prizes page in my mind and got hold of a copy of that newsletter and seen for himself.’



'Harry, mate,' Ron said gleefully, 'I'm glad you think about depressing stuff!'

'Why didn't he see the walls of Snape's dungeon then?' Hermione asked, 'Surely he would have seen that Snape *did know* about the paper?'

No, he wouldn't have,' Harry said regretfully, 'it was one of the thoughts I put in my Pensieve. I didn't want him to see what happened when you...' he changed tack quickly, 'you know, had to fix my potion...it was, well, embarrassing wasn't it?'

Hermione bit her lip to restrain a smile and looked away, a crimson tide washing along her cheeks.

'Was that that strange bowl thing?' Ron asked, 'with the silvery stuff in it? I didn't know what it was when I saw it, I was going to poke it with my wand –'

'NO!' Harry said loudly, 'No, don't do that. Its private, like a diary. I don't want you seeing me doing, well, stupid stuff...when I was little, and things.'

He cast a look at Hermione, who looked suddenly apprehensive. Even this, however, couldn't put a damper on the last twelve hours. What, with Malfoy being expelled making it a great morning, adding to last night at the lake...all in all, Harry thought he'd struggle to be happier. And he'd be playing Quidditch again today; Ron was taking his first training session as Gryffindor Captain and Harry was itching to get back on his broom. It had been too long since he'd opened up his Firebolt.

Speculation soon blossomed among the Hogwarts students as to the true nature of Malfoy's expulsion. In the Gryffindor common room, Harry had become a hero again because, although they didn't know the particulars, his housemates had deemed that Malfoy's removal from Hogwarts must have had something to do with him. All through the next day Harry was subjected to outbreaks of sporadic applause, requests for handshakes from people he hardly knew and so many slaps on the back that he was in a fair amount of discomfort come the end of the day.

More importantly to Harry, he was approached many times over the day with students offering grovelling apologies. These were all from people who had tried to injure him in some way and so claim some of Malfoy's gold. At first, he was tempted to get angry and yell insults at these people but, after so many of them came forward, he decided he couldn't hate the entire school and let them off with a friendly warning.

Harry found, to his surprise, that Hogwarts contained many students that he would say, without the slightest hint of anything condescending, were in the same financial bracket as the Weasleys. The mixed look of self-loathing, guilt but desperation worn by many of these students made Harry feel so sorry for them that he thought he wouldn't mind a few cuts and bruises so they could earn some cash. Especially if it meant diluting the wealth of the Malfoy family.

When classes were finally over for the day, Harry and Hermione met Ron for dinner before Quidditch training. Harry couldn't recall seeing Ron as animated as he did over dinner, wolfing down his food with indecent enthusiasm, talking at high speeds and spraying bits of pastry all around the table.

'Ron!' Harry cried as a chunk of shortbread careered into his glasses, 'can't you swallow before you speak?'

'Sorry,' Ron replied with a gulp, 'here. Have my napkin.'

Hermione gawped at Ron pityingly, as though she felt sorry for him.

'Don't you study magic here?' she asked somewhat loftily, 'Here, Harry. Let me help you. *Scourgify!*'

She tapped Harry's glasses, which were instantly clean. Ron's face went a colour to match his hair but he only glowered at Hermione for a few moments, and then returned to rabbiting on about all the new Quidditch moves he planed to try out.

'What will you do while we train?' Harry asked Hermione, who seemed quite bored with Ron's incessant gibbering.

‘Oh, I thought I might come and watch you...the pair of you...the team, whatever. You don’t mind do you?’

‘No,’ Harry replied quickly but suddenly felt rather anxious. It wasn’t as if Hermione had never watched him play before but, strangely, he felt apprehensive as though he had to perform for her. He imagined himself as a circus seal, balancing a Quaffle on his nose as he rode his Firebolt in a standing position. It wasn’t a pleasant image.

Ron was slightly subdued as they changed into their Quidditch robes later. Harry didn’t need to ask what it was; he had noted the change in Ron’s mood as soon as Hermione had said she was coming to watch the training. He recalled her rejecting an offer from Ron to watch him train alone, and he knew what he’d think of her being here tonight. Sure enough, as soon as they were alone he voiced his mind.

‘Why does she come to watch you play but not me?’ he moaned as they walked out onto the pitch. Hermione was sat alone in the stands and she waved down to them as they walked out. Harry noticed then that she wasn’t alone. Luna Lovegood was sat a few seats down from her, wearing her hideous lion-hat. Harry thought she must just have too much time on her hands.

The training was actually very good. Why Harry found this surprising he didn’t know; Ron was, after all, a bigger knowledge of Quidditch than he himself was so it would follow that he could construct useful training and tactics. Harry was pleased that Hermione’s presence in the stands didn’t distract him much, though the fact he caught the snitch 26 times, performed multiple loop-the-loops and Wronski Feints, and accelerated to top speed every time he passed her had little to do with him getting his broom legs back.

Harry even took to fighting with the Bludgers. He asked Hermione to bewitch one to follow him, and then delighted in swooping and soaring away every time it tried to unseat him. Hermione didn’t seem to like this too much and eventually undid the charm, her face a distinctly pale hue. Harry made a note then that Hermione wasn’t to be impressed by daring acts of heroism such as bludger-baiting.

As the week drew to a close Harry was glad to be settling into a pattern. Malfoy had been expelled for two days, he was playing Quidditch and he and Hermione had reached an understanding. All in all, he was pretty happy with himself. On top of this, the Gryffindors were still cheering him in the defeat of Malfoy and some of the students who had entered the *Slytherin Standard* competitions had taken to giving him token gifts of apology. Harry now had a rather large pile of chocolate frogs, several large boxes of fizzing whizzbees and an extensive assortment of Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans. Though he didn't want to admit it, the Slytherin newsletter had been perversely responsible for an upsurge in his popularity.

Hermione was the only one who didn't seem to be in a particularly overjoyed mood. She had become oddly pensive, and had taken to donning a decidedly worried look every time someone mentioned Malfoy. They were sitting under a tree on the banks of the Great Lake when Harry confronted her about this. Taking night time strolls around the Lake before the doors were locked had become a regular thing. Harry was thankful again to his father; the Invisibility Cloak was invaluable.

'Aren't you happy Malfoy's out?' Harry asked as he looked at Hermione in the glimmer of the moonlight.

'Oh yes, of course,' she said, though sounding like she hardly believed her own words.

'Well, what then? You don't look like you're as ecstatic as the rest of us.'

'Well, I'm just...concerned.'

'About what?'

'I was thinking, maybe it isn't a great thing he's gone. I mean, here Dumbledore was keeping watch over almost everything going on. But now, he's at home, with his father, and I'll bet he'll encourage him to do as many bad things as he can. Maybe get a plan inside the school from outside. They are quite resourceful.'

‘Lucius Malfoy’s in Azkaban,’ Harry said, ‘what can he do from there?’

‘Azkaban wont hold him,’ Hermione said anxiously, ‘it didn’t hold the other and it wont hold him. He’ll be out before long. Oh, Harry, don’t you see? Draco Malfoy could be more of a danger to us...to you...from where he is.’

‘I can’t see how,’ Harry said puzzled.

‘If his father cooks up a plan and it involves you, he’s going to need someone close to you. Maybe not a friend but a classmate or opposing Quidditch players, someone who can get close enough to harm you. Don’t look like that; do you really think it’s unlikely? V-Voldemort’s been quiet for a while, that cant be good. He must be planning something major and that’s bound to involve you. You’re his nemesis; he needs to get you out of the way before he can move on. If he doesn’t he’ll lose face in front of his supporters who’ll say he can’t kill someone so young.’

‘So, what’s Malfoy got to do with that?’

‘Think about it, Harry. Riddle’s diary got into Hogwarts to get to you; Voldemort lured you away from Hogwarts last year; Barty Crouch Jnr became an impostor to get inside Hogwarts and close to you. All of Voldemort’s plans involve you, all aimed at destroying you. You’ve survived so he wont stop going for you. And if he uses Malfoy he can plant the seeds of his plan right under our noses. We might have hated Malfoy but his Slytherin friends didn’t, and I bet they’ll be only too willing to help do things to you.’

Hermione flung her arms around him desperately, Harry feeling that she thought he might burn up and die there before her eyes. He patted her head gently and she went into silent reflection. He didn’t want to accept what she’d said; he was just starting to enjoy life with no immediate threat. But now, paranoia was creeping back into his psyche.

The next day, Harry took his first Defence Against The Dark Arts class. He had a quick breakfast and hurried to the classroom armed with a set of Dark Arts textbooks. With the help of Hermione and Ron

the room was set up, duplicating the layout of the Room of Requirement. Harry remembered fondly the sessions he held there and hoped he would have as much success now.

He was rather astonished when double the amount of students turned up for his class. It was explained to him that NEWT Defence students had voted not to train with the Slytherins, so the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had modified their timetables to take the practical class with Harry. He felt choked, but Hermione's subtle squeeze of his hands jolted him back to normal.

'Right, well, er,' Harry began, 'thanks you all for coming. I didn't expect this but its great. Today, I'll think we'll just go over the basics, disarming and blocking. Then we'll move onto more advanced things later.'

'Disarming? Blocking? What use are they going to be?' said an unseen dissenting voice from the back. Harry was taken aback by what happened next.

'They do work! They are useful! Harry used them to fight You-Know-Who. Saved your life, didn't it Harry? And we used them when some of us went to the Ministry of Magic last year. We used them fighting Death Eaters and they worked then too. Didn't they Harry?'

'Yeah they did, Neville, they did,' Harry said reassuringly, 'we have to start with the basics, make sure everyone can do them. If you don't like my class I heard there's room with the Slytherins!' several people laughed, 'If you master the charms by the end of the lesson we'll have a bit of a laugh and tackle the boggart in the cupboard over there.'

All heads turned to the cupboard on the desk, which emitted a convenient rattle at just that moment.

'I'll demonstrate the charms to refresh everyone's memory, then divide into pairs and take it in turns to practice. Hermione, wanna be my assistant?'

Several voices went 'oohh,' several people whistled and many sniggered as Hermione, going slightly red, stepped up to Harry.

‘Shut up you lot! Harry said, though he was unable to suppress the grin that had gripped his face, ‘Don’t make me demonstrate my best hexes on you!’

Harry pointed his wand at Hermione, ‘Ok? On three, one – two – three!’

Nothing. Harry looked at Hermione and just couldn’t disarm her. More chortling rang out in the classroom, many of the girls made swooning noises, but Harry didn’t care.

‘Let me,’ Hermione said giggling, ‘*Expelliarmus!*’

Harry’s wand flew in the air and the force of the spell was enough to knock him over. Applause and laughter bounced off the walls as Hermione helped Harry to his feet.

‘Where did you get so strong?’ Harry asked as the class divided into pairs.

‘I told you,’ Hermione said coyly, ‘I had a crush on a teacher once. I worked extra hard for him.’

Harry didn’t answer that. He moved around the class, showing people where they were going wrong. They all seemed fairly proficient and by the end of the class they’d all mastered the charm and were facing the boggart. Laughter and giggles swam in the air as the boggart changed into humorous forms. Harry, who was at the back of the room clearing up, looked up as the laughter stopped. Only a soft weeping came from the corner. The crowd suddenly parted and Hermione ran through, her hands shaking over her mouth as tears trickled from her eyes. Harry raced forward, shouted ‘Riddikulus’ to get rid of the boggart and looked around for an explanation. People were muttering.

‘Have you ever seen that before?’

‘Can it take more than one form?’

‘What did she see?’ Harry asked frantically, ‘What was it? Ron?’

'It was...um,' Ron began but he didn't have the words. He just turned away and sat down, his hands were trembling too.



## Chapter 11: The Pains of Truth

The next few days were as strained as Harry had felt at Hogwarts. Usually, when something bad happened, he could rely on Ron and Hermione to be there and support him through the bad times, which tended to involve him in some way. Even when he had fallen out with one of them, the other was there for him and kept him company until they resolved the problem. But now, he had no such luck.

Whatever had happened with the boggart had affected them both so much that Harry felt like they were ignoring him. Ron's conversation had become token; meaningless titbits about Quidditch and homework and the occasional rant about the Slytherins. Every time Harry tried to get to the bottom of the boggart mystery Ron would clam up, go a weird pale colour and either change the subject or leave the room.

Hermione wasn't much more helpful. In fact, if anything, she was worse. Every time Harry saw her, which had become a rare event over the last few days, she looked like she had either been crying or was teetering on the verge, waiting to be set off. Making her sob wasn't the hardest thing either; all Harry had to do was speak and she'd be off, bawling and convulsing like crying was going out of fashion. Harry dared not smile at her; he had tried it once and she practically screamed before scuttling away from him.

On the plus side, his lessons had become slightly easier. This was in no way connected to the workload, which Harry decided was starting to border on child labour, but it was due to Hermione's extra effort. She was set on helping him an inordinate amount with his work, though incredibly not to the detriment of her own. She seemed happiest while working, or at least the tears looked to be slightly further away from the surface than usual. She didn't say much, just helped Harry to get all his work right and complete in faster time than ever before. It was almost like she was trying to make up for something, though Harry couldn't imagine what this could be.

Potions class had become an interesting lesson all of a sudden. Much to the obvious dismay of Professor Snape, Harry had shot, with a large helping hand from Hermione, to joint top of the

class. Snape had nothing to say about Harry's potions other than the flame was occasionally too high or that he was stirring too fast. Ordinarily, Harry would have expected him to turn to personal insults instead. This, however, didn't happen. Harry was stuck with the impression that Snape was well aware that he was skating on thin ice; rumours were rife among the student population that Snape had actively encouraged Malfoy's Harry-baiting in the defunct Slytherin newsletter. Harry reluctantly accepted that Snape was both sufficiently cunning and perceptive to realise that these rumours may, at some stage, reach the ears of other teachers and he now appeared at pains to treat Harry as though he were merely a piece of wood. Harry didn't mind this; compared to Snape's usual treatment of him this was a positive improvement.

The lessons in the dungeons grew over the next few weeks to a silent battle of wills between Snape and Harry. Snape was almost imploding with the effort required to not insult Harry on a regular basis and Harry was desperate for a reason to goad him into a response. He was getting closer to actually doing it. His Occlumency lessons were going well; he wasn't shaking nearly so much after each lesson and he could resist Dumbledore's attempts to break his mind almost half of the time now. The problem was that Dumbledore gave the impression that he had cracked Harry's most guarded secret and Harry found it a weakness he couldn't even speak about.

'How is Miss Granger?' Dumbledore asked, smiling. They were just ending the lesson, Harry was picking up his Pensieve from the desk and was shocked to find that Dumbledore had brought up Hermione. He had tried so hard to put all his thoughts about her into the shallow stone dish.

'She's fine,' Harry said, 'as far as she'll tell me.'

'Have you had a falling out?' he asked in a fatherly sort of way.

'No,' Harry replied before telling the story of the boggart lesson, 'and Ron won't say what it was, Hermione cries every time I mention it and the other people in the class don't want to get involved. I just can't get anyone to tell me what had happened.'

'What do you think it was, Harry?'

‘I-I don’t know...’ Harry said, feeling it was a strange question to ask, ‘Should I know?’

‘Well, Miss Granger is a...*close friend* of yours, I should imagine that I would expect you to know her worst fear. After all, I believe you could guess what Mr Weasley’s boggart would be, yes?’

‘That’s easy,’ Harry grinned, ‘the biggest, hairiest, most vicious spider imaginable with eyes only for eating Ron.’

‘Precisely,’ Dumbledore smiled, ‘now, how about Miss. Granger. Worst fear, Harry?’

‘Probably failing all her exams...’ Harry said dolefully, doubting the truth of what he’d said before the words had left his mouth.

‘Have you failed to noticed that she has grown, Harry?’

For a moment, Harry was reluctant to answer this. He did have *one* answer for that question, but doubted very much it was the kind of growing Dumbledore was hinting at. The Headmaster seemed to read his mind.

‘As a person, Harry,’ he said almost sorrowfully, ‘as a young lady, she has matured, begun to blossom into a young woman of depth and of feeling. She is sensitive to more around her than you realise. Perhaps, more sensitive about certain things, certain people, than others. Can you guess who I mean? Exams, tests and things of that nature are still a part of Miss Granger, a place from where she draws some knowledge. But her strength, that has been supplied from a different source for quite some time now. Imagine what would happen if that source were to be abruptly denied to her. What would she do? How do you think *Mrs Weasley* would react to such a thing...should it take form in a boggart.’

There was something loaded in Dumbledore’s last sentence that shot through Harry like a cannonball, smashing into his head and reminded him how clueless, how much like a typical teenage boy, he actually was. If the situation hadn’t caused him so much concern he

thought he would have probably been pleased about it; anything that made him seem even slightly like people his age was a good thing.

He bounded down the corridor towards the Gryffindor common room, intent on doing something to Hermione, trying to somehow show her that it was going to be all right. He really wished he believed it himself; the chat with Hermione about Voldemort's lack of activity had planted a seed of intangible foreboding that was growing steadily in his mind. If he was honest, he wasn't sure that he was going to survive the coming war, but he had to say something. Hermione didn't need to hear the truth as much as Harry didn't want to face it himself. She had to be lied to for her own good.

Harry found Hermione by the common room fire, her nose buried in *The Handbook of Hexes*. She had taken to poring over dark arts textbooks, Harry acknowledging suddenly that she was probably looking up spells to save him from anything that might make her boggart real. She looked up as he crossed the room, her eyes taking up the familiar welling look that she had perfected. Harry sat on the arm of her chair and she looked questioningly up at him. Slowly, trying to avoid Ron's roving eye, he slipped his arm around her neck and bent down to whisper to her.

'I worked out what your boggart was,' he breathed quietly, 'I want you to know, it's OK, I'm going to be okay. I'm not going to die.'

It wasn't exactly what he'd wanted to say but words often tended to fail him at times like this. Hermione seemed more overcome than ever; tears gushed from her eyes without warning and her face took on a lost, desperate look. She leaned her head against Harry's side and sobbed lightly, though her whole body was pulsing as if it were being electric shocked.

'H-how did you know? Wh-who told you?'

'I worked it out with Dumbledore,' Harry explained, 'Why didn't you say something?'

'Didn't...c-couldn't...face-face it. I c-cant bear it, Harry. I can't ever see you like th-that.'

‘You wont,’ Harry said, fighting with his voice to make it sound confident.

‘You can’t know that!’ Hermione cried making several fourth years sit up and take notice. It had also attracted Ron who took one look at Harry’s arm around Hermione and scowled so much that Harry swore it was giving off heat.

‘Yeah, but what I do know is that if it does happen I’ll make sure you are far away from me way before that. But, stop being so cheery! I’ve never been given a prayer of surviving against Voldemort but I’m five time escapes and counting. Even my mum and dad didn’t escape him that much and they were two of the best people of their times. Just like you and m-’

Harry’s voice trailed off as a bold realisation coursed through him. Hermione seemed to have understood what Harry meant, too. She had stopped crying and was staring at him, her eyes piercing through him the way only they could. And for the first time in a while, she smiled softly. Her once permanent blush was struggling to not invade her cheeks once again. Harry had to look away; Hermione was shining so brightly that he couldn’t look at her. He was mildly surprised to find his hands trembling on his knee. He knew Hermione was staring at him but just couldn’t muster the strength to look back at her.

The thought was too much. Had he *really* got to the stage of thinking about Hermione like *that*? It was impossible, he was way too young after all. But then, a little voice said in his mind, mum and dad met at school and she didn’t even like him till seventh year, and then they got... Harry couldn’t think of that, the image was just so powerful that it was making him dizzy.

A few hours later and Harry decided that he had to go to bed; if he spent much more looking at Hermione and the strange glow she had developed he was certain his eyes would go funny beyond repair. He wasn’t exactly keen on climbing the stairs to the dormitory, expecting Ron to be in an explosively foul mood after he stomped out of the common room minutes before.

Harry was a bit concerned, therefore, when he reached the dormitory to find Ron asleep, or at least pretending to be. The over-zealous snores were a little too fictitious to be believable. Still, Harry felt slightly relieved at not having to go through a blazing row. He had been unable to procure any interest from Hermione and his lack of progress with her was starting to get to him. Harry tried hard to be encouraging, he just couldn't bring himself to do anything truly productive.

Harry dreamt that he and Hermione were walking endlessly around the lake. Ron was encircling them on his broomstick, not allowing them a moment's peace to talk. Harry was growing increasingly frustrated as he had something really, really important that he had to ask Hermione and the longer he waited the more he forgot what it was. To make matters worse, a giant life-sized edition of *Unfogging the Future* was waltzing around the lake with Harry's Firebolt and hundreds and hundreds of chocolate frog cards were spraying forth from between them.

Harry was awoken by a thud near his bed. Groggy and bleary-eyed, he reached for his glasses and looked towards the source of the noise. He saw someone sitting up in Ron's bed, rocking back and forth and muttering furiously under their breath.

'Dobby?' Harry asked.

'No, not Dobby.'

The voice was Ron's but it was so cold and malicious that Harry didn't pick up on it at first. It had risen slightly in pitch and was quite eerie in the stagnant darkness.

'Ron? What are you doing? What time is it?'

'Its Harry time, but then I suppose you already know that. Its always Harry's time...'

'Ron, what are you on about?' Harry asked quietly but Ron acted as though he hadn't heard him.

‘Its Harry has this and Harry has to have that. Youngest Seeker in a century? Give him the best broom there is. Fifty house points, Harry. Oh, sorry for trying to kill you and your best friend’s,’ Ron scoffed at this point, ‘pet, have the most expensive brand new broom going. Win the Triwizard Tournament - get kissed by Fleur – kiss Cho – lets all kiss Harry. *Have another FIFTY points, Harry!* I fancy our best friend, you don’t mind if I ask her out do you? No? Great. Maybe its Ron time for a change...but wait, no! It can’t be. Harry is still *breathing!* Its always Harry time...’

‘Ron, what’s gotten into you...’

Harry stopped as Ron rose and bent over him, and when he spoke his voice was shrill and icy.

‘Don’t talk to me, Potter. Just take your little dish and leave me alone. Have your cake, my cake, and everyone else’s cake and eat to your hearts content. Don’t deny Harry Potter anything, he has to have it all.’

‘Ron...’

But Ron ignored him. He fell back into bed and jammed the hangings shut. Harry looked around and it hit him. There, on the bedside table was his Pensieve with a miniature, silvery version of himself and Hermione standing up in it. They were hugging and Harry knew immediately that Ron had been using the Pensieve. How much had he seen? There was no way to know but one thing was certain: Harry’s secret was certainly out now.

## Chapter 12: The Great Rift

Harry had found, to his detriment, that things he wanted and things he got were very rarely the same thing. He wanted to be normal; no chance there. He wanted Voldemort to be after someone else; not likely while Harry was still alive. He wanted to have parents that he lived with and could go to with his problems; this too was denied him, as was almost every other parental figure in his life. They were either removed or they died. And at this moment, he wanted Hermione as his girlfriend and Ron as a best friend who supported him. Alas, neither of these was true either.

Nor were they likely to be, judging by Ron's attitude. Harry would have preferred Ron to be screaming and shouting at him, venting his anger like Uncle Vernon. Maybe this way, some of his frustrations would burn out, allowing Harry time to discuss what was going on. Unfortunately, Ron adopted a different stance. Rather than be mad and viciously furious, he took on a frightening Snape-like transformation. Instead of bellowing obscenities into Harry's face, he took to make snide remarks and comments and treating every one of Harry's attempts to patch things up as a joke.

'Pass me the sugar, would you Harry?' Ron sneered over breakfast, 'If you can stop thinking about *her* for long enough, that is?'

'Ron, come on, you've got the wrong -'

'Blah, blah, blah. Do you hear someone talking? Or smell that awful smell? Manure isn't it? Coming from your direction, *mate*. Maybe your mouth. Did you brush well this morning? Oh, sorry, you *must* have. Want to impress the in-laws in-waiting when you meet them wont you?'

For a brief moment, Harry teetered on the edge of a knife and could have tipped either way. He could either blurt out to Ron all that had happened during the summer and how secretly he would *love* Mr and Mrs Granger as parents-in-law, then smack Ron for his childishness. Or, he could just smack Ron around the head anyway and let him stew in the knowledge that he didn't know half of what had gone on between he and Hermione and if he *did*, then he'd probably implode from the grief. The entrance of Hermione to the



Great Hall jolted Harry into deciding to stay balanced precariously on the knife, and leave the fight for another time.

Hermione's obliviousness to the silent rage sizzling between Harry and Ron made the situation almost comical, such was the contrast between them. It filled Harry with sadistic glee to realise that Hermione was probably radiant with happiness after the chat they'd had last night, and this made Ron's anger even more poignant in Harry's eyes. Hermione didn't take long to cotton on to the fact that something was wrong, her eyes darting from Harry then to Ron with some frequency. Harry gave the most surreptitious of headshakes as Hermione sat down, hoping she understood not to ask what the problem was. Ron, however, showed his usual tactless qualities.

'Did you know Harry thinks about you all the time?' He spat, 'Never thinks of anything else by the looks of it. Hermione, Hermione, Hermione...morning, noon and night. Especially before bed. God knows what kinds of sick thoughts he has about you, or what he does inside those hangings...he *does* thrash about a lot.'

'That's enough!' Harry yelled angrily as people from surrounding tables were craning in to listen, some sniggering others whispering.

'Ohh, its enough, now! Harry Potter had spoken!' Ron snorted loudly.

Hermione's face was shining through embarrassment but otherwise she looked totally unabashed. She also seemed to have realised that her and Harry's agreement was still in place, something Harry was glad of.

'That's nice,' she said casually, smiling at Harry, 'Strange that you listen, though. That's a bit creepy and a bit weird, don't you think?'

Ron was totally wrong-footed by this. He obviously hadn't expected this response and turned from blotchy with anger to glowing with shame. He couldn't even speak.

'I've lost my appetite,' Hermione continued plainly, 'C'mon Harry. Fancy telling me about some of those fantasies of yours on the way to Transfiguration? Come on, I'm dying to know.'

Several people laughed and Harry chuckled in spite of himself as he stood up.

'Tell them to me, too, Harry,' grinned Dean Thomas.

'And me, I wanna know all the gorey details!' added Seamus Finnigan.

'And us!' chirped Lavender and Parvati together, 'Boys' minds are disgusting, but funny!'

'Hey!' Dean and Seamus protested.

'I'll post them all up on the Gryffindor notice board once Harry has given me a full account!' Hermione giggled, 'Now come along, Harry. We can even try some out if you're quick!'

That part of the table erupted with laughter and the boys cheered Harry, now shockingly flushed, as he trotted along behind Hermione and out of the hall. He expected her to go all serious and stern once out of earshot of the whooping Gryffindors but she instead retained her air of playfulness and happiness.

'I can't believe you told him,' she said lightly, 'and do you really thrash about in your bed?'

'Not that I'm aware of,' Harry answered trying to ignore the stirrings under his ribs, 'But I didn't say anything. He went in my Pensieve; I woke up last night and there he was, looking into my thoughts. Who knows what he's seen.'

'I do hope you only have nice thoughts about me, Harry?' she said coyly.

'Do you?' he replied with a swooning voice that most certainly wasn't his own.

'Well...maybe not *all* nice, you are helpless after all. But you're a boy, it isn't your fault. Just try and keep them in your head. Then again, having Dumbledore seeing them wouldn't be great either would it?'

'No, probably not. Besides, are all your thoughts nice?'

'Of course...' she said, but her cheeky smile betrayed her so much that she and Harry burst out into simultaneous giggles that lasted all the way to Professor McGonagall's classroom.

'I still think we should keep our agreement up, though,' Harry said as he leant against the wall, 'at least for a bit.'

'I agree,' Hermione said, 'wouldn't be fair to rub Ron's nose in it -'

'-though I wouldn't mind it-'

'Come on, Harry, be nice. Ron's your best friend. He doesn't want to think he's losing you that's all.'

'Is it?' Harry shot incredulously, 'Is that what you really think? You're so naïve, its cute but annoying.'

'Then what is it?'

'I told you before, I'm not telling you. It's amazing someone as smart as you hasn't worked it out. I bet its obvious to everyone else.'

Hermione made to reply but Professor McGonagall opened the door to let them in and Harry raised his hand to silence her when she tried to bring it up again in the classroom.

'How'd it go, Harry?' Dean Thomas said with a wink as he sat in front of him.

'Great,' Harry grinned, 'second times a charm, you know?'

Dean laughed and nodded his head in agreement before turning around. Ron slumped down huffily across the room and Harry found that he was glad they were as far apart as they could be.

Harry managed to avoid Ron for the rest of the day. He was glad to not have to be in the same room as him during Potions and sat many seats away from him at lunch. Despite Hermione's prompting, he refused to speak to him during Care of Magical Creatures and was happy when he could go wherever he liked once lessons were done.

He was bright enough to realise, though, that Ron's smarting would wear off eventually and his reaction then would decide the fate of their relationship. If he accepted it and supported Harry and Hermione as a pair then they could finally get together properly and everyone would know they were a couple. If, however, he decided to be churlish and immature then life could become tough. Life in the dormitory would be strained, Harry would likely lose the friendship with the Weasleys and, importantly, Harry would no longer have a best friend. Harry hoped, though he didn't bet too much on it, that Ron would pick the first option.

By the middle of the next week, Harry had discovered which way Ron had decided to go. They hadn't spoken for a whole week and Harry was starting to miss it slightly. He was glad that Hermione was spending considerably more time with him but didn't argue too much when she went off to try and get Ron to reconcile with Harry. He, himself, refused to admit that he was any way in the wrong and deemed apologising out of the question. Ron's stance was pretty much the same, judging by the frustrated and exhausted appearance Hermione took on every time she returned from chatting with him.

'Just leave it, there isn't any point.' Harry said after one such attempt.

'I don't know what's the matter with you two,' she said exasperatedly as she sat down, 'why can't you just work it out?'

'It's just not that simple,' Harry said, 'but anyway, it's him that has to get over it and accept it. What have I done that's so wrong? It's his problem and if he can't deal with it then tough. Boo Hoo!'

'Harry, he's your best friend, you can't let it end like this. Do it for me, I don't want to be the cause of breaking you up.'

'There isn't anything I can do,' Harry pleaded, 'If there was a way then I'd try it. But he doesn't want to know. You know how he gets. That chip on his shoulder always gets in the way. If he wants to be friends then its up to him.'

It was evident, though, that Ron had no intention to try and make up. Instead, he seemed as keen as Harry was to put distance between them and minimise their contact. The way he went about this, however, left Harry with a very sour taste in his mouth.

'What do you mean?' Harry yelled, disgusted that Ron would even joke about this.

'Which bit didn't you get?' was Ron's scathing reply.

It was Tuesday evening, on the Quidditch pitch. Harry had seen the note on the Gryffindor common room notice board telling the Quidditch team about training on Tuesday night. Harry hadn't expected Ron to tell him, just that he would be huffy and moody when he turned up for practice. He hadn't been expecting this.

'When you say, *"off the team"*,' Ginny said slowly to Ron, 'you're not serious are you?'

'Deadly,' Ron replied coldly.

His voice had certainly dropped a few degrees recently but got up a little in pitch, making it slightly shrill. It scratched at Harry's eardrums just listening to it.

'So, you're kicking me off the team?' Harry stormed, clutching his Firebolt tightly and feeling his hand clamming up against the finely polished handle.

'That's right.'

'And who's replacing me exactly?'

'Well,' Ron said, his voice betraying the slightest trace of dismay, 'it's between those two.'

Harry looked towards where Ron was pointing and couldn't help but scoff.

'Neville or Colin Creevey! Are you having a laugh?'

Harry was so incensed that he didn't even care about offending Neville or Colin. Besides which, they were too far away to hear Harry casting aspersions against them anyway.

'It doesn't matter,' Ron said loftily, 'we want people who can work as part of a *team*, not people who stab you in the back. We've all voted and think you're not much of a team player. Can't have a team if you don't trust each other. Bye, Harry.'

Harry swore at Ron and almost made to hit him. Ron stood there, daring Harry to try. It was obvious he would love noting more than the chance of a punch up with him. Ron stormed away after a minute or so of glaring at Harry, and Ginny came up.

'Sorry, Harry,' she said miserably, 'it was all Ron's idea. We did vote, but the condition was either vote you off or forfeit our place on the team. We're going to be dreadful without you. I mean, Dean and Seamus have joined us as Beaters but Neville as a Seeker? Glad Malfoy isn't here to see this.'

Harry said nothing to Ginny, choosing instead to thunder off to the Gryffindor common room. He found Hermione flicking her wand casually at a pair of knitting needles that were making a strawberry red scarf and glove set. She looked surprised, but pleasantly so, to see him.

'Hi,' she said, 'why aren't you at-'

'That git...that total *idiot!*' Harry stormed.

'What? What's happened.'

And he told her. She listened in silence but when she spoke her voice was calm.

'It doesn't surprise me, really,' she said sadly.

'What? Why not? Or have you already worked out he's a complete tool?'

'Well, I expected as much to be honest. That's why I've been trying to make you two patch things up. Before it gets out of hand and one of you does something that really hurts the other one. But, it's done now. I thought he might have made you get detention or something, being a prefect and everything. I didn't think he'd do this, it's harsher than I thought. Are you still not going to tell me why this has upset him so much?'

'Have you asked him?'

'No.'

'Then do that. I told you, you want here it from me. He may be doing my head in but it's his dirty linen and there's no way I'm airing it in public for him.'

The rest of September passed off without much more interest, apart from Hermione's sixteenth birthday on the 19th. Harry had dipped into his Gringotts vault and ordered a pure sapphire eternity ring and an amulet with a shining silver otter attached to it. Harry had like the two diamonds in place of the otter's eyes.

'Oh, *Harry!*' Hermione said as she opened the boxes, 'they're *gorgeous!*'

'Now don't cry,' Harry said as Hermione started to well up, 'the ring is your birthstone I think...I hope. And I got the otter on there to match your Patronus. Just in case you need protecting when you're on your own.'

She threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

'Thank you, Harry,' she said, drying her eyes, 'this is too much. You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble.'

They were in the Room of Requirement. Harry had wanted a nice, romantic room with a lovely view, lit by candlelight and with soft music playing. He had enlisted the help of Dobby and the house-elves to prepare a meal to fit the occasion. It seemed to have worked the trick.

The night was a great success and for the first time in a while Harry had no problems. When they parted at the foot of the dormitory stairs at around one in the morning, Harry thought Hermione was actually going to do it. It was her choice not to after all, but when she stepped in close Harry shook with nerves. She leaned in, but only pecked him on the cheek before setting off up the stairs leaving him shaking and slightly disappointed.

In the dormitory, Harry heard Ron's voice. He was talking in his sleep, his voice taking on new levels of high and cold.

'The time is coming...things are coming together...by tomorrow, we will be ready to apply our plan. Are you ready?'

Ron answered himself, but his voice was normal and shaky.

'Yes...but, I don't think I should do this. I don't want to hurt anyone or get in trouble. '

'Think about what's being done to you, how *they're* conspiring against you. Surely you want revenge?' Ron said, his voice shrill and icy once more.

'No...not really,' Ron's normal voice said uncertainly, 'I'm not that bothered. I'm looking elsewhere now. I could drop it if I wanted to...'

Ron's voice tailed off and he spoke no more. Harry got into bed wishing Ron had a Pensieve so that he read his thoughts. Then he changed his mind, seeing that the box he'd placed his own one in had been forced open and broken. Still, if Ron was hiding something,



he'd dearly love to know what it was...especially if he was planning to hurt someone.

## Chapter 13: Harry's Revenge

The next day Harry made sure to keep an eye on Ron whenever he could. He didn't want to be seen doing this, as he was quite keen to make sure Ron didn't think he was fishing for an apology. Instead, he hung back out of his eye line and made sure he could see him, and be in a position to stop him if he should attack someone. Strangely, the stealth stalking put Harry on edge; the anticipation of Ron's impending assault had made him unusually anxious. He assumed this was, what Hermione termed, his '*saving-people-thing*' kicking in.

His mood wasn't helped by the news article on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* that morning.

### *AZKABAN BREAKOUT SPECIAL*

The headline read; it didn't improve from there on in.

*Ministry of Magic officials confirmed this morning that the once impregnable fortress, Azkaban, has again allowed another high security prisoner to escape. The inmate, one Lucius Malfoy, is a known supporter of You-Know-Who and it is believed that he was behind the escape. 'We have reason to believe that Lord Vol-Thingy orchestrated this breakout personally,' reported Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge, 'the Dementors, now widely believed to be under his control, carried out the freeing of said prisoner. Several other prisoners, we believe, were subjected to the Dementor's Kiss, and are now being evaluated for future treatment.'*

*Minister Fudge must now consider his position under substantial threat. Several prominent members of the Wizengamot have already voiced their desire for Fudge to be replaced, with Albus Dumbledore the popular choice as his successor. Dumbledore, however, is unlikely to accept the job while he is Headmaster of Hogwarts. The reason for this, it is rumoured, is the secret stash of sherbet lemons and red rope liquorice (popular Muggle sweets) that are kept at Hogwarts under the guard of dragons. These rumours remain unconfirmed.*

*MORE INFORMATION ON MALFOY AND HIS ESCAPE  
pages 2-6; POSSIBLE REPLACEMENTS FOR CORNELIUS FUDGE*

*page 10; LATEST ON ARCHIE PRITCHARD'S ATTEMPT TO SAIL AROUND THE WORLD ON AN INFLATABLE MERMAID page 29.*

'So that's it then,' said Hermione mournfully, 'I *told* you this would happen!'

'And you were right,' Harry said, 'Well done, do you want a gold star? It doesn't make it any better does it?'

'It's just a matter of time before something bad happens,' Hermione said anxiously, looking towards the door of the Great Hall as if expecting Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy to burst in any second and curse them all to death.

'Well, if his plan does involve Malfoy then its certainly moving into place now, or at least the next phase. Still, at least Dumbledore's still here.'

Dumbledore's unworried look always seemed to have a calming effect on Harry. Dumbledore was smiling now, chatting animatedly with Professor Vector about some undoubtedly boring subject that Dumbledore was able to make exhilarating.

Harry was glad to have Ron under his nose for the first part of the day. It was Friday, so Harry was taking his practical Defence class. It was the perfect opportunity for Ron to attack someone, so Harry made sure Hermione, with whom he was demonstrating and practising the jinxes and hexes with, had her back to Ron, in case Harry needed to curse him over her shoulder.

Harry wasn't really practising as much as he should have been. Again, he found that he just couldn't bring himself to perform any of the jinxes on Hermione. Dean and Seamus were having great fun teasing him, suggesting loudly that he didn't want to have any of his fantasies with Hermione restricted if one of his spells damaged her.

Hermione was giggling non-stop and Harry was starting to wish she'd grow out of the giggling phase. Still, she kept making comments about how certain hexes could affect the fantasies, which she was making up on the spot. Harry was left wondering just how much time

she had spent thinking about them and why she had so many examples to hand. On the other hand, the things she was saying seemed to be infuriating Ron, and Harry was only too happy to encourage this.

It was Transfiguration next lesson and again Harry was glad to have Ron under sight, not that he would dare try anything with McGonagall about. The lesson went quite well with Harry not having to worry about Ron, even if the dove he had transformed from a model aeroplane still had wheels and a propeller. Hermione, again, got top marks as her dove not only flew, if only in continuous circles around Harry, but it could also coo, which many of the girls found 'too cute for words'.

Ron disappeared at lunch, which Harry found slightly disturbing, but after Harry had completed a sweep of Gryffindor tower and the boys toilets and not found any bodies he was satisfied that Ron was probably moping somewhere. Harry had spent the lunch hour making elf hats with Hermione. Harry was about as bad at this as he was at golf and Divination combined. His hat didn't have any form or shape but Hermione said it wasn't a total loss and used it as a lining for the common room bin.

After Charms in the afternoon Harry tried to keep an eye on Ron for as long as possible but there was Quidditch practice, which Harry was glad would be in the rain, so he had to let him go. Ginny had sidled up to again say how much she wanted him back on the team but didn't say she'd try to convince Ron of the same thing. Harry noted that her eyes had looked very dark, almost black in fact, very unlike Ginny's normal colour. He assumed the workload of lessons and Ron's manic Quidditch schedule was taking it out of them.

As September ended and October began to fly by, Harry was unnerved by the lack of anything unusual with Ron. He had become more distant than ever but he wasn't being unfriendly anymore; in fact, they'd both stopped glowering at each other whenever their gazes met and Harry thought it wouldn't be long before they were talking again. He had actually forgotten what they were arguing about in the first place.

Hermione had taken to showing her Sapphire ring wherever she went, as well as her otter necklace. Harry kept getting comments in the hallways such as, 'can I buy the toaster, Harry?' or, 'has Hermione got her bridesmaids yet?' and, Harry's personal favourite from the Slytherins, 'you'll make the ugliest children ever.' Harry liked to respond to this by saying that they were just jealous to be losing the title of World's Ugliest Child, for Slytherin house must contain the least attractive children this side of the yeti.

Ron's lack of violent activity made Harry considered that his dream might have been nothing more than that, just a dream. The only thing that Harry was bothered by was that there were striking similarities between Ron's lack of action and the silence of another villain with known murderous intent. It was unsettling.

As the week before the first Quidditch match approached, Harry redeveloped the feeling of anger for Ron. The excitement of the first match, Gryffindor versus Slytherin, was building intensely and Harry was annoyed that he wouldn't get the chance to put one over on the old enemy. For that's how they seemed; Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students had decided to side with Gryffindor and the atmosphere had become tangibly violent and dangerous. There were numerous incident of violence in the school from scuffles outside classroom to ambushes on team members in the toilets.

Harry was more angry and Ron for being selfish rather than for him kicking him off the team. He felt Ron was cutting off his nose to spite his face. He even thought that Ron was starting to regret kicking him off in the first place.

'Hey Weasley,' Harry heard a Slytherin call to Ron one afternoon, 'looking forward to getting slaughtered on Saturday? And you haven't even got Potter to save you. Handed us the game by picking Longbottom!'

'Yeah, well,' Ron had replied, 'even if we do lose, even you know that with Harry we'd whip you. So your victory will be nothing.'

However, Ron's seemingly reconciliatory mood didn't last and Harry feeling sorry for Ron died at the same moment.

'Gonna lose, Weasley. No Potter, no team. I wonder if he'll be cheering us?'

'Probably, he is a backstabbing traitor,' Ron bellowed, the pressure finally taking its toll on him, 'we don't need him and I DON'T NEED HIM! GEDDIT?'

Ron gaped as Harry and Hermione stepped out from behind Crabbe and Goyle, who'd been blocking the corridor.

'That was harsh, Ron,' Hermione said angrily, 'Its time you grew up.'

Ron looked ashamed and Harry was glad of this and, for a tiny moment, he hoped the Slytherin team would smash that dumb look off his stupid face on Saturday.

Harry, though, was given the perfect opportunity for revenge on Friday night. Professor McGonagall approached Harry after dinner with a most unusual request.

'Well, Potter,' she said, 'I have tried to persuade Mr Weasley to reinstate you but he's insisting...captain's prerogative to pick his own players. Still, I can't pretend that...never mind. I was wondering, Potter, if you'd be interested in commentating, considering you will be available.'

'Yeah, ok, why not?' Harry shrugged. His thought was that Ron was bound to make many errors in the game and he would have a great chance to heap more misery on him.

The time of the game arrived and as the Gryffindor team, looking pale and peaky, trudged through the icy drizzle and into the changing room the rest of the school trooped into the stands. Harry and Hermione made their way into the teachers' box, from where Harry would be commentating. The teams flew out to a great roar and Harry read blindly from the team sheets in front of him, his voice echoing as it was magically magnified around the stadium.

'And we're off, it's Spinnet to Weasley G, she drops it to Katie Bell...ow! Bad bludger, from Goyle-surprised he can even stay on his broom...oh sorry, Professor, can't I insult the Slytherins? Lee Jordan

always did. Anyway, Slytherin in attack...Zabini speeds past Bell, dodges a bludger from Dean Thomas, c'mon Neville! Go for him! Zabini advances on the goal. What a shocker! Ten-nil Slytherin.'

Ten minutes later and the score was eighty-nil and the score greatly flattered Gryffindor. Harry had rattled off several subtle insults at Ron but as he was playing so poorly nobody complained. Nobody except Hermione.

'You aren't helping,' she said as she kicked him for an insult aimed at Ron's freckles obscuring his co-ordination.

'Well, he shouldn't have kicked me off the team!' Harry stormed, 'They're getting buggered without me!'

'Ron told me he dropped you for your own good,' Hermione said, 'he said you'd thank him for it one day. Harry, I don't think he's himself. Just don't make things worse for him. Be nice, do it for me. You will if you lo-'

'C'MON RON! Harry yelled suddenly, 'C'mon Gryffindor! Everybody chant, even you Professor. C'mon team, you can do it! I'm going to get sacked after such appalling commentary anyway so come on. Weasley is our King! He does not leave a single ring! He never lets the Quaffle in! Weasley is our King!'

The chorus rang out around the stadium but had little effect. It was true that Ron made two saves and Ginny scored Gryffindor's only points but the Slytherin Seeker caught the Snitch as Neville finally gave in and fell off his broom. The final score was 230-10. Ron's reaction to Harry, though, was highly unexpected.

'Why d'you do that for?' he ranted as he met Harry in the Gryffindor common room.

'I was trying to help, trying to gee people up,' Harry yelled back.

'Yeah? Well we don't need your help, don't want your help and you can take geeing up and stick it where the sun don't shine. And, despite what you may think, the sun *does not* shine out of yours.'

'Ron, it was me,' Hermione said nervously, 'I tried to get Harry to help you. He didn't want to.'

'Yeah, and you cant keep your Mudblood nose out of this,' Ron snapped, but looked like he deeply regretted it immediately.

'Don't you *ever* call her that!' Harry sniped coldly, fury tickling through his veins. He had stepped up to Ron and was eyeballing him intently, their faces inches apart.

'Or-or what?' Ron stuttered.

'Say it and see,' Harry replied dangerously, 'I wont need a wand by the way. I ever hear you calling her that foul name again and I will make you regret it. Now apologise.'

'Sorry, Hermione,' said Ron, his voice had changed back to its normal low octave from the shrill, icy one it had been. Harry barely noticed the change.

'This is our problem, Ron,' Harry spat, 'do not bring Hermione into this. If you have a problem, take it up with me. Wanna throw names and insults? Here I am. You leave her alone, you clear about that?'

Ron may have been taller than Harry but he was clearly wary of him. He mumbled something about understanding then span around and scurried off to the dormitory. Harry was left with a crowd staring at him.

'Ok, Ok,' he said nastily, 'shows over. Go back to your business.'

Several cast him malicious looks but most turned away silently. Harry was fuming.

'Don't defend him!' Harry said as Hermione tried to do just that, 'He isn't worth it!'

'Don't say that!' Hermione begged, 'He's your best friend. I told you he isn't right, and its up to us to find out what has made him like this. Remember, "his gift for spreading enmity and discord-'



'Don't try and tell me Voldemort's behind this!' Harry cried, several eavesdroppers flinched, 'Ron's just become a grouchy git. He doesn't need help there from anyone. He's just a jealous little child.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Hermione asked.

'Oh work it out already,' Harry snapped, 'I'm going to bed.'

And he did, feeling gut-wrenchingly guilty at the hurt look he'd left on Hermione's face, but annoyed that she knew what was going on but just pretending not too. He wasn't going to give in, it's just what 'Ron-demort' would want.

## Chapter 14: Wand fight at the Hogsmeade Corral

When Harry awoke the next morning he was slightly perturbed to find Ron rocking back and forth on the edge of his bed. He glanced sideways at Harry several times, his mouth jittering as if he were trying to speak. Eventually he just drew back his hangings, got out of bed on the other side and sidled out of the dormitory without saying a word. Harry wasn't sure he wanted Ron to say anything, but equally he wanted their quarrel to reach an end. It was getting boring.

Harry left the dormitory some time later, ambling down the stairs and taking in a rather chilly Sunday morning. The common room was practically empty with only a few third-years sitting in the corner. Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, opened his large yellow eyes as Harry passed him and sat in a chair close by. Harry decided to go down for breakfast later; he wasn't particularly famished anyway.

Crookshanks stood up and stretched, his bottlebrush tail standing on end as if he'd been electrocuted. He fixed Harry with a piercing, inquisitive stare, much like Hermione would if he did something out of character. Next minute, the ginger cat pounced up onto Harry and settled in his lap, purring contentedly.

'What's getting into you?' Harry asked the cat, smoothing it behind the ear, 'You're getting very friendly. What are you after, eh?'

Crookshanks gave Harry an affronted stare.

'Just being friendly, eh? Well, at least you like a bit of a cwtch and a cuddle. Unlike your boss. Where is she anyway? Have you seen her?'

'She's right behind you,' said Hermione's voice sounding slightly amused.

Harry craned his neck to see Hermione standing behind him, wearing a grin that said she was expecting an explanation for something.

'Talking to animals and expecting them to respond is a sign of madness, Harry,' Hermione said.

'How much did you hear? Have you been listening all the time?'

'I heard enough,' she said shrewdly, 'are you coming to breakfast?'

Harry dislodged Crookshanks and followed Hermione to the portrait hole as she clambered through.

'I saw you looking, you know,' she said turned round, that maddeningly shrewd tone lacing her words.

'Looking at what?' Harry said in his best imitation of innocence; Hermione smiled almost seductively and Harry felt a shiver whip along his spine as his skin tingled beneath his robes.

They took the long route to the Great Hall, neither saying very much. Hermione was blooming with blushes and Harry thought he'd said enough to embarrass him enough for one day. Hermione eventually broke the silence between them, which was almost tangible, and Harry wasn't in the least bit surprised by her chosen topic.

'How was Ron this morning?' she asked cautiously.

'Still alive when I saw him,' Harry said coldly.

'I cant believe what he called me last night, I was really hurt. All those times when he got angry for someone else calling me...well, you know...I just never thought he would.'

'I suppose he's been under stress lately,' Harry said diplomatically, 'what with the Quidditch fiasco and stuff. I think he wanted to talk to me this morning, he was being weird and stuff. Didn't say anything though. Not very good in situations like that.'

'No,' said Hermione dejectedly, 'but at least he seemed willing. Oh, Harry, wont you give it another go? Maybe he really needs us but feels threatened that we're...er...closer...than, we...we used to be. It really pains me to see you two apart and know that it's all my fault.'

'It isn't all your fault!' Harry cried, 'We're all to blame somehow. Look, I'll talk to him. I'll make him listen to what I have to say and if he doesn't like it then that's it...done. I'll tell him that we've just become closer friends and if he doesn't believe that then it's his problem.'

'Ok, thank you, Harry. Just be nice, understand his situation. It's a good time now, anyway, what with the first Hogsmeade weekend coming up.'

The posters advertising the weekend had been up for several days. Many of the teachers had voiced their concerns at letting the pupils leave the safety of the school in the current threatening climate. Dumbledore, however, had decided that it was best for morale to let the students visit the village. The last thing everyone needed was to think they were prisoners in the school with nothing but lessons and the occasional Quidditch match to take their minds off other, more dangerous happenings.

Harry didn't manage to corner Ron until the day before the Hogsmeade weekend in the middle of October. Harry had been waiting for him inside the Entrance Hall until the Gryffindor team came back inside from Quidditch practice. On the way down, Harry had bumped into Ginny emerging from behind the statue of the one-eyed witch that guarded the secret passage leading to Hogsmeade. Her eyes were again lifeless and misty and she seemed very disorientated.

'Hi Ginny,' Harry said as she popped out from behind the statue, 'where've you been? Shouldn't you be at practice?'

'Nowhere...sweets...went to steal...Fred and George told...anyway Harry, yeah, about Quidditch. I did try to talk to Ron but he's being an idiot. He's been like that a lot lately. I have to go...practice...job...important things...'

And she was off, stumbling drunkenly down the hallway gibbering to herself as she did. Harry had seen someone behave like that once before and that person was mad. He hoped Ginny wasn't doing something illegal or that could get her into trouble. After all, Mrs Weasley would likely kill her if she did.

When Harry managed to talk to Ron he was glad that Quidditch had made him both tired and incapable of much resistance. This was how Harry wanted it.

'Ron, over here,' Harry called and showed Ron into an empty classroom, 'Look, I'm going to talk and you're going to listen. Don't interrupt me or I'll hex you so that you can't move. This argument has gone on for too long, I can't even remember what we're fighting about. I told you...no interruptions! Anyway, I'm tired of it. I don't like fighting with you and I'd hope you feel the same way. What you said to Hermione last night, that was totally out of order. I said *no interruptions!*

'Right, so here's the thing. If you want to sort this out, me, you and Hermione, meet us in Hogsmeade tomorrow. I'll tell Hermione we're going to the Three Broomsticks for twelve o'clock. If you want to make up, or break up for good, then come and meet us there. If you don't turn up, I'll assume that you don't want anything more to do with either of us. Its up to you. And, by the way – I'd keep an eye on Ginny if I were you. She's acting really strange and I saw her coming through that secret passage that goes into the village.'

Harry said no more, simply swept from the classroom and vaulted the stairs two at a time to reach the common room before Ron had left the classroom. Harry met Hermione by the fire; she was writing a letter while Crookshanks played with one of the elf hats.

'Well,' Harry said, panting slightly, 'I spoke to Ron. Told him to meet us in the Three Broomsticks at twelve tomorrow if he wants to sort this out. Who you writing to?'

'Victor,' Hermione said quietly.

'Krum?' Harry said briskly, 'Didn't know you still wrote to him.'

Hermione raised her eyebrows, probably in response to Harry's short tone of voice, something he hadn't meant at all.

'I'm writing to tell him I can't write to him anymore,' Hermione said vaguely.

'Why not?'

'Well,' she said, carefully avoiding Harry's eye, 'things have changed, haven't they? It's too, well, awkward to write to him now. Not with all the stuff that's going on.'

'What? You mean with Voldemort and stuff?' Harry said sharply.

'Yeah...yeah and that,' Hermione said though her voice was distant, 'Night, Harry. Meet you in the morning?'

'Yeah, ok,' Harry said, and Hermione was up and at the foot of the stairs as quick as a flash, 'Night.'

Hermione dashed upstairs and Harry heard a door close somewhere in the distance. Crookshanks was sitting on Harry's lap again, his head on Harry's chest.

'What was all that about?' Harry asked with a nod towards where Hermione had been, 'Do you know? Course not, you're a cat.'

Crookshanks looked offended. Instead of hissing, though, the cat rubbed his head against Harry's chin and skulked off after Hermione. Harry made his own way to bed feeling very confused. He didn't hear Ron come up at all.

But Ron slept that night, Harry was certain of it. It was Ron's voice that woke him, it had regained the high, icy pitch that it had taken on before. It spoke as Ron slept and Harry was more disturbed by this conversation than the previous one.

'Are you turning your back on me?' the icy voice asked.

'Yes, I cant do this...I wont. He's my best friend and you're just lying to me. I don't believe you anymore,' answered Ron's normal voice.

'You have come to far to lose your backbone now,' icy Ron said, 'after all you have given, all you have put in place. It is too late for you not to follow through.'

'I'll back out. I'll undo those things. If I can remember what they are.'

A high, cold laugh sent a chill through Harry that literally made his stomach churn. There could be little doubt anymore; Hermione was right.

'It is too late, fool of a boy, do not dare to test me. My wrath knows no bounds. I knew one of you would try to back out, I know all. It is unfair on my enemies.'

Ron's voice died into the gloom and grumpy snores were soon the only thing ebbing out from Ron's bed. Harry wanted the morning to hurry on, he had to tell Hermione.

When morning came, however, and Harry was all set to tell Hermione all of what he'd heard during the night, an unexpected event sent Harry's mind blissfully blank. Harry knew Hermione was on her way down the stairs when Crookshanks slinked past wearing a look that Harry somehow understood. Footsteps on the stairs alerted Harry to Hermione's approach and his mouth was open, ready to speak. His mouth stayed open when she emerged, and his eyes popped out as his jaw edged towards the floor.

It was a Hermione he'd only seen once before. She had applied copious amounts of Sleek-Easy potion to her hair, which seemed to be full of little glittery bits that sparkled in the silky sunlight. Everything from her eyes to her cheeks had been touched up with something so that they glimmered and glinted, looking slightly glossy but in very pretty way. Hermione was blushing and looked embarrassed; Harry could see she was wearing that 'waiting-for-approval' look. Harry just wished he knew how to talk.

'Well?' she asked eventually, giving a little curtsy and looking extremely apprehensive.

'Stuningyoulookmygod!' Harry managed to say.

Hermione giggled nervously and took Harry by the arm; Harry still couldn't close his mouth.

'C'mon,' Hermione said motheringly, 'Chin up, Harry!'

Seeing Harry's devastated reaction seemed to give Hermione a blast of self-esteem. She held herself differently than she usually did; her head was in the air but not in the condescending way of Aunt Petunia, but in a proud sort of way. She was utterly contented and Harry felt underdressed and totally minging next to her. He wished he'd thought to use a little sleek-easy now...

They wound their way up to the village and got looks from many students. Unusually, the looks weren't sniding or derogatory, except from the Slytherins, but were almost complementary. Harry got the feeling most of these people weren't surprised to see Harry and Hermione in the way they looked together. Harry liked being in the position more than he could put words to.

'Well, what do you fancy doing?' Harry asked, feeling suddenly under pressure.

'Well, we've got a while before we have to meet Ron,' she said, still beaming, 'I don't know. We could-'

She was suddenly staring over Harry's shoulder with a devious look spreading across her face.

'Harry, I've got an idea!' she said excitedly, 'C'mon! It'll be fun!'

She grabbed his arm and dragged him up the road. It was a little while before Harry knew where he was going. Up the road, a little teashop was perched quite alone with several pairs of Hogwarts students ambling in and out. One of the pairs was Cho Chang and Michael Corner. Harry suddenly got hit by a thunderbolt of comprehension.

'Hermione, no!' Harry said, 'We can't! It isn't nice. Why can't we just leave them alone.'

'Oh, don't be such a spoilsport, Harry,' Hermione said determinedly, 'I want to. It'll be good. Just play along. Imagine the look on her stupid face.'



Hermione's expression had suddenly gone very dark and Harry thought it best not to argue. He allowed Hermione to usher him into the teashop and sit at a table where Cho could see them. She looked up immediately and the look of surprise on her face would have been, at any other time, extremely funny. Harry ordered two cups of coffee and Hermione sipped at hers, casting dark glances at Cho in between strange, dreamy glances at Harry.

Harry heard Cho start telling Michael how pretty he was; he and Hermione both had to bite their lips to not laugh. Hermione couldn't help herself; she said loudly that she thought Harry was so handsome, and how glad she was he wasn't a pretty boy. Harry actually choked on his mouthful of coffee at the look of fury on both Cho and Michael Corner.

Hermione was well in the game now. She reached over and squeezed Harry's arm, whispering sweet nothings to him.

'Sweet nothings, Harry, sweet – ha ha – nothings – ha ha!'

Harry was hurting with struggling not to laugh. Something then happened that changed the mood. Hermione reached over and took Harry's hands in her own. Harry had a fleeting memory of Roger Davies on Valentine's Day, last year in this shop. Hermione started by saying nice things to him in a laughing voice. Soon, however, her voice lost this tone and became serious and swoony and Hermione's dreamy expression was real.

He could feel her hands trembling slightly as she spoke and noticed a lump and been born in his throat. Hermione was talking slowly now, staring deeply into Harry's eyes and Harry, for his part, was shaking with the fear from drowning in hers. Her fingers were not so much rubbing his hands over-exaggeratedly, as they had been, but were smoothing them softly. Harry moved his leg, before it's twitching caused a local hazard, but he moved it right against Hermione's.

Her eyes ignited, shining with such force that Harry was sure that if he didn't drown in them then they'd burn him to death, or at least blind him in to a coma. Harry felt Hermione's hand shifting, like she wanted to move it, though he didn't dare hope to where. He

glanced at Cho, who was looking angrily from the entwined hands to the touching legs, which had started to move slightly against each other independently of the owners' control.

Harry was lost in such paralytic euphoria that he would have been happy enough to die at that table there and then. The sound of the door tingling as it opened shook both he and Hermione from their reverie. Instantly, their hands flew apart and the legs shot back towards their respective owners. They got up in silence and left. Hermione didn't look at Harry outside, though he could tell she was wearing a beaming grin brighter than the soft daylight.

Hermione had pulled her coat tight around herself, denying Harry a continued look at her mesmerising outfit. A scary thought hit him: *forget the agreement*, it said. *She's got all dolled up, so she wants you to do something. It's your turn, Harry...* And for a moment, he was going to. Hermione was nudging her head ever so slightly to look at him out of the corner of her eye, spinning her head back around every time Harry caught her doing it, her smile more beaming than ever. A sickening sight brought Harry back to reality.

'Malfoy!' he hissed.

Hermione looked towards where Harry was looking. There, in a doorway, was Draco Malfoy, his white-blond hair shining in the shadows. He was talking to a girl with long, fiery red hair. He seemed to be very animated, pointing threateningly at her.

'Ginny!' Hermione squealed.

Harry was in a run before he decided to move his feet, Hermione close behind. Malfoy looked up and snarled as he approached, Ginny looked mortified.

'Potter!' Malfoy spat, 'Should've known you'd come nosing. I wouldn't bother with the hair, Mudblood, you can't magic away hideousness.'

Harry jammed his wand in Malfoy's direction. Crabbe and Goyle jumped out from the shadows with their wands drawn. Harry knew they were dumb, but who knows what Snape had taught them

in practical defence classes. Harry saw Hermione whip her wand out, but Ginny didn't move and they were still outnumbered.

'What do you think Potty?' Malfoy snarled, 'Got you a little crossfire, how do you like that?'

Harry was about to turn around when he heard a voice he never thought he be more glad to hear.'

'Zabini!' yelled Ron's voice, 'The madcap! Where you going with that wand, mate?'

Ron was pointing his wand behind Harry and he heard footsteps rustle somewhere to his right side. Ron was accompanied by Terry Boot, Ernie MacMillan and Dean Thomas. All had their wands drawn.

'Need a hand, Harry?' Ron asked. Harry saw Ron had his hand extended and he took it and shook. Ron smiled as though a veil of stone were falling from him.

'Yeah...*mate*,' Harry glowed back, he saw Hermione wipe a tear quickly from her eye. Harry would have loved time to chat but wands were still drawn.

For several, long moments nobody said or did a thing. It was quiet. Very quiet. It seemed the bustle of Hogsmeade was left behind. The yard in the shadow of the Hogs Head, where they were, had a silence all of its own. A low whistle of wind was the only sound. Then it began.

Harry anticipated it first; a tiny swish of Malfoy's wand. He ducked, correctly expecting Zabini to curse him from behind. That spell took crumbling bricks from the pub wall. An eruption of bangs decimated the silence, jets of lights of all colours flew around the little yard. Bricks crumbled, windows smashed, a barrel of water punctured sending a spray hissing out around the place.

Harry's heart stopped. Malfoy had his wand pointed at Hermione, whose back was turned as she duelled with Zabini. There was nothing for it; he dived across the air and caught a jet of purple

flame across his shoulder blade. The pain seared through the wound, Hermione screamed somewhere in the distance. In the battle.

Harry came to and pointed his wand at Malfoy, but Ginny had woken up. She had turned her wand on Malfoy, Harry was stunned to see it had been pointed at Dean, now prostrate on the ground. Malfoy was suddenly attacked by strange, tiny green things. Harry registered the Bat-Bogey Hex just as a voice pierced the scene.

'No! Idiot girl!'

Harry looked up as Lucius Malfoy, wand pointed at Ginny. A blasting explosion to his left meant Harry didn't hear the curse Lucius Malfoy sent at Ginny, but she was caught square in the head. She tottered for a moment before falling. Malfoy turned his wand on Hermione.

'No you don't!' Harry screamed as he threw himself over Hermione. In the background, Ernie and Ron were double cursing Goyle, who was bouncing between them trying to fall but each spell smashed him back to his feet. His screams turned Harry's blood cold. He could see Crabbe, out cold and bloody on a verge at the edge of the yard, Zabini was stumbling nearby.

Harry looked at Lucius Malfoy, his cold eyes gleaming in triumph as he opened his mouth.

*'Avada -'*

BOOM

Malfoy was knocked off his feet and flew into Draco and they both hit the punctured water barrel. Harry looked up and saw

*'Dumbledore!'*

Harry was so overcome with joy that he burst into tears. Hermione cradled him in her lap as they watched Dumbledore advance on Malfoy. It wasn't like when he had marched on Voldemort at the Ministry of Magic; he looked furious, murderous even. Harry had the feeling that Dumbledore was going to curse every atom of Lucius Malfoy to bits.

'I thought I told you,' Dumbledore said in a voice so calm that Harry shook through the dominance of it, 'never to come back to this school. I snap your boy's wand and you buy him a new one? You will continue to make mistakes such as this, won't you Lucius? It will only lead you to one end. And you think to attack, Harry...here? You really are less intelligent than I thought.'

Dumbledore flicked his wand at the water and Harry knew what was coming. He had seen Dumbledore cocoon Voldemort using this charm. But Malfoy had another trick. He pulled Draco's hand and placed both it and his own against a small medallion. They vanished in a rush of wind. And all was quiet.

Dumbledore helped Harry and Hermione to their feet.

'Professor, sir,' Harry said quickly, 'I'm so sorry. I didn't mean...they...I mean all-'

'Silence, Harry,' Dumbledore smiled softly, 'its ok. Anyone who knows your...well, *feelings* could not have expected you to act any differently.'

Harry hoped he was the only one who saw Dumbledore's surreptitious glance at Hermione when he mentioned *feelings*.

'We have to get you back to school, those wounds need looking at,' Dumbledore said as he created stretchers for Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Ginny and Dean. The rest limped behind.

'Why aren't you going to punish me?' Harry asked, 'I'm not above school rules and this was blatant fighting.'

'You were attacked, Harry,' I cannot punish you for defending your friends. And as it was Mr Malfoy who cast the first spell I cannot punish any of you. You can all claim the self-defence excuse. Do not take it as a means to start attacking people, though. Still, I can't help but be pleased to see how...*prepared* your students are.'

Dumbledore smiled. Harry slipped his arm around Hermione and held her up as she limped next to him. She smiled at him and winked; Harry wasn't convinced she had really hurt her ankle.

'Hey, Harry. Got a spare shoulder?'

Ron was limping badly, blood oozing out from under his robes. He really was hurt. Harry offered his shoulder and Ron leant on it. He was heavier than Hermione, but as they walked down and chatted about the battle, and looked at the disbelieving pointing from the students they passed in the village, Harry was glad things were back to the way they should be.

## CHAPTER 15: All Hallows Broken Loose!

The tale of what had happened outside the Hogs Head was soon the stuff of Hogwarts legend. All that people could talk about in the corridors was what had happened, who was involved and who was hurt the most. Ron, who Harry remembered relished these sorts of occasions, fell into his familiar pattern of embellishing certain events. By the end of the next week the story had mutated from a passable version of the truth to a yarn where Ron was boasting that he and Harry had planned the whole thing and their argument was part of it. It even involved him wrestling Crabbe after he'd accidentally transfigured him into a mountain troll.

It was this last lie that would have unravelled it in ordinary circumstances. Harry and Hermione, however, decided to indulge Ron in his moment of celebrity; both felt it was so easy these days to push Ron into a royal sulk that it was best to leave him be. Harry even laughed; Ron had somehow managed to get hit in the forehead by something and he had a nice scar there...

Harry was more interested in what had happened, or nearly happened, between himself and Hermione during the visit to Hogsmeade. Neither had mentioned what had happened in Madam Puddifoot's teashop and Harry couldn't tell if Hermione was avoiding the subject. She took to using the excuse of Ron being close by whenever Harry even skirted the subject; this involved the mentioning of tea, hands, legs, Cho or any reference to intimacy. She backed away several times when Harry leaned over to look at what she was reading. Harry was left feeling puzzled.

Ron was certainly trying to make up for lost time. He wasted no time in reinstating Harry to the Quidditch team, mainly because Neville was begging not to be selected again. Harry was delighted to accept and apologised for berating Ron during his commentary of Gryffindor's last match. Ron also couldn't stop saying sorry to Hermione for calling her a Mudblood. He seemed very keen to give her hugs, apologetic arm-in-arm walks and took to smoothing her hair whenever she was sat down.

Harry tried very hard not to give in to the crippling jealousy swimming in his stomach every time Ron did these things. In this new state of paranoia, he couldn't help thinking that Ron's beaming smiles, whenever Hermione didn't object to this physical contact, were laced with something. He knew he was just imagining things and that he had no right to become possessive of Hermione. She was free to do as she liked after all.

But Harry was concerned about her choices. She didn't seem to mind Ron's increased contact; in fact, Harry was sure she positively bathed in the affection. Her radiant smiles and happy laughter sliced through Harry like a blunt, disease-ridden knife, as he realised she was taking pleasure from another boy's attention. All in all, despite the euphoria most of the school was rapt-in following the Hogsmeade battle, Harry was back to feeling low, alone and empty.

It was a week before Halloween and most of the students were looking forward to the great feast that graced the occasion. Harry, though, was too downhearted to be very concerned about much at all. He was pleased that he and Ron made up, it seemed like their latest spat was all over and things would get back to normal. The only thing was that a problem had developed about this and Harry hadn't seen it coming.

The problem was that after such a long, and occasionally hurtful period apart, Harry had become used to spending more time with Hermione. Increasingly, he had enjoyed being alone with her without the regularly churlish and immature behaviour of Ron. True, it wasn't as funny as when he and Ron were good friends but Ron had become so weird that these times were gone now. He and Ron had very few laughs as remade friends. Harry hoped that this was just awkwardness after being at loggerheads for so long.

Despite the lack of comedy, Harry still found, to his slight surprise, that he preferred being with Hermione without Ron. This was probably due to the fact that as a trio Hermione didn't pay him as much attention as he had become used to. He knew he couldn't expect her to ignore Ron totally but he would have hoped for more attention himself. Especially after what had happened with them over the past few months.



Ron had become very different. Harry noticed the changes in the time between the fight in Hogsmeade and Halloween. At first, they were small and insignificant. Just typical Ron...making up for lost time in the best way he knew how. It turned out that he had been struggling with most of his classes without Hermione's help and during lessons, now that they were friends again, he leant on her for advice. He would ask her for pointers on what he was doing wrong and to check that he had got certain things correct. Harry couldn't help thinking that he was making things bad on purpose so Hermione could help him more often.

Ron would use these occasions to pay Hermione an indecent number of compliments. Harry got so bored listening to, 'oh, Hermione, you are the greatest,' and, 'have I told you I love you,' and, 'I wish I had your brains *and* your beauty,' that he moved away. Hermione looked offended and a bit upset but not for as long as Harry thought she should.

In the common room, things were even worse. Ron was rushing to sit in the chair next to wherever Hermione was, asking her what books she was reading and even offering to knit with her. Hermione was so rapt in Ron's new enthusiasm for her that Harry thought she might have forgotten him. It was only when Ron started offering to whisk Hermione away to study together in the library that Harry grew wary. It didn't help that Hermione accepted with such gusto that Harry felt physically sick. Even other people seemed to notice what was going on.

'Don't worry, Harry,' Parvati Patil said to him one day, 'there's more fish in the sea...if you just open your eyes...'

She gave Harry a curious smile as she walked away. Harry thought he could guess what she meant but didn't have the nastiness in him to say he wasn't interested. Instead, Harry took to comforting himself with Crookshanks, who had become increasingly attached to him. Harry spent his common room time rolling balls of string and toy mice across the floor for Crookshanks to chase while Hermione and Ron spent hours in the library.

Hermione did seem to notice something was wrong by the middle of the week. It was Wednesday night, Ron had cancelled Quidditch practice and was instead heading to the library with Hermione. She looked concerned as Harry sat scribbling at his homework.

'Fancy joining us in the library?' she asked half-heartedly.

'No, he's fine by there, aren't you Harry?' Ron called from across the common room.

'Yeah, I'm fine here,' Harry replied without looking up, 'Go on, three's a crowd.'

'Harry,' Hermione said in a molly coddling voice, 'It isn't like that.'

'Then get going then,' Harry said coldly, 'make it like whatever it is.'

Hermione didn't answer but it was a few moments before she left. Harry looked at his unfinished Potions homework, the inky lines swilling into blurs. He rolled up his parchment and pushed it aside. He had half a mind to nip down to the library and catch them in the act of whatever his mind imagined they were up to. He was feeling too sorry for himself to even do this but decided to go for a walk.

He was barely a few corridors from Gryffindor tower when a strange series of sounds grabbed his attention. One of the empty classrooms on this floor was full of flashes of light. Harry strolled cautiously to the door and peered through. Ginny was inside, shooting blasts of light at one of the walls, which went hazy for a few moments before returning to normal. She caught sight of him and jumped, hiding her wand behind her back as she did.

'Hi, Ginny,' Harry said opening the door, 'What you doing?'

'Oh, this,' she said vaguely, her eyes lifeless and hollow, 'detention...have to clean...make ready...'

'Ready for what?'

'Nothing...go, don't worry.'

'Ginny-'

'Harry!' she yelled suddenly, the life flickering in her eyes, *'Help me! Have to stop...before...too late...cant fight it...fight for me, Harry...'*

'Fight who?' Harry asked worryingly, 'Who, Ginny? Tell me.'

But she didn't. Instead, she burst into tears and ran headlong into the wall she was shooting with her wand. Harry stood in amazement as she flew right through it and vanished. Harry raced up and touched the wall; it was solid. Harry couldn't get through. There was only one thing for it.

Harry was out of breath by the time he reached the library. He had sprinted all the way and vaulted Mrs Norris, denying the urge to kick her out of the way. He had to find Ron and Hermione. But they weren't in the library. Harry accosted several people on the way downstairs, desperate to find them. A few were scared, one first-year girl started crying, but eventually someone told him they'd been spotted going outside.

Harry found them, ignoring the pain in his chest as he saw Hermione's arm around the redheaded shoulders, as they walked around the lake. Hermione looked hugely embarrassed as Harry approached and took her arm down quickly.

'Harry, it isn't...Ron was feeling ill...not what it looks-'

'Whatever,' Harry said angrily, 'look, its Ginny...'

And he told them the story. Hermione looked terrified and gasped many times; Ron looked suspiciously calm.

'Probably just imagined it mate,' he said vaguely, 'she probably ran through the door and you thought it was the wall. Anyway, you know how the building changes; maybe only girls can walk through the wall.'

Harry was gob smacked at Ron's lack of concern and even Hermione looked disbelieving at his stance. Harry shrugged at her.

'I'm going to see if I can find her,' Harry said.

'I'll come,' Hermione said quickly, stepping towards Harry.

'No, I don't want to disturb you,' Harry said coolly.

'Please, Harry,' Hermione said quietly, 'Let me come.'

She was staring imploringly at him so he nodded, not quite sure what was going on. Ron was content to stay where he was.

Harry raced back up to the school with Hermione hot on his heels. He was barely through the doors when Hermione grabbed him and dragged him into a broom cupboard.

'Hermione!' Harry yelled, 'What are you-'

'Sssh!' she said placing her finger on his lips, 'I haven't been able to get you alone for days. I have to tell you something. There's nothing going on with me and Ron. You need to understand that. He's just really behind on his work and I'm helping him out. There's nothing funny going on.'

She stepped closer in to Harry. He couldn't see her in the dark but she was very close; her breathing was loud and heavy.

'W-What are you do-doing?' Harry stuttered nervously.

'I've missed you, Harry,' she said softly, 'I tried to get Ron to let you come with us, but he's saying he works better with me on my own. I don't mean to ignore you, I'm just trying to repair the rift, you know.'

She moved in again. Harry was shivering; he could feel her hot breath on his cheek. He was sure his heartbeat was echoing around the cupboard.

'Her-Hermione,' Harry whimpered, 'W-we have to find Gi-Ginny.'

'Mmmm,' she said.

'Now!' Harry said sternly and he stepped past Hermione and opened the broom cupboard door, gasping for breath as he did. Several students wore startled looks when he emerged abruptly; these changed to giggles and incredulous stares as Hermione stepped out behind him flattening her robes. Harry shot her a sniping look and raced up the stairs and into the Gryffindor common room. He stopped in his tracks as the portrait swung open.

'Ginny?' Harry asked totally flummoxed.

'Hi Harry,' she said brightly, though her eyes didn't reflect the feeling in her voice, 'have you been running?'

'How did you get here?' Harry asked.

'Been here ages,' she replied calmly, 'Why?'

Harry just stared at her.

'I saw you in a classroom on the third floor a while ago,' Harry said, 'you vanished through a wall.'

It sounded stupid saying it out loud.

'Nope, sorry Harry,' Ginny said, 'I went to bed for a nap and got up just now. I haven't been anywhere.'

But Harry knew better. Hermione looked a mixture of annoyed and puzzled. Harry knew part of her was thinking he'd cooked up the story to get her away from Ron. Harry had to admit, that's how it looked.

The rest of the week was a nightmare. Ron was angry about Harry taking Hermione away from him and kept making comments like, 'hey Harry, I'm borrowing Hermione for a moment. If anyone vanishes, ask someone else for help, ok?' It wasn't helped by Hermione laughing at half of these comments, and looking sorrowfully at him for the rest.

The worst event came on Halloween. In the morning, notices went up about a Christmas Ball that Dumbledore had decided to put on in the first week of December. It was a morale building event, according to the headmaster, and an inordinate number of students signed up to

stay for Christmas. It meant a month of excited chatter, that Harry expected would be much like that which had preceded the Yule Ball two years ago. Harry had one partner in mind but wasn't sure she would go with him. Not when she had so many options.

Hermione revealed that within a week of the announcement going up she had been asked by four different people, all of whom she had politely declined. She had one more admirer, though.

'Well, I'm going to ask her, what do you reckon?' Ron asked Harry as they trudged off the Quidditch pitch.

'Who?' Harry asked, though he would have bet his Firebolt on knowing the answer.

'Hermione of course,' he said, 'Do you reckon I should? I just wanna make sure she doesn't go with anyone else.'

'What?' Harry blurted in shock, 'What do you mean?'

'Well, last time she went with someone else. I want to make sure she doesn't this time. I know...you go with Luna! She's dying to go. She's been telling me all week.'

'You talk to Luna regularly?'

'All the time,' Ron said casually, 'she follows me around. She's ok, a bit loony but ok really. She's been saying she wants to go and wants a date all week. You take her and we can all sit together. It'll be a laugh.'

Harry wasn't convinced and had no intention of asking Luna Lovegood. After all, Hermione would turn down Ron...

Or so Harry thought.

'She said yes!' Ron cried as he caught up with Harry, on Thursday morning before transfiguration.

'What? Who?' Harry said drunkenly.

'Hermione. The Ball? You know? I asked her, she said yes. I knew it!'

'Great. Nice one. Well done,' Harry said in a haughty voice he didn't own. He felt like he had shrunk several feet and his legs were oddly made of iron. This couldn't be happening.

'Harry,' said Hermione's voice behind him, she sounded out of breath, 'Can I talk to you?'

'You've said enough today, I think,' Harry snapped.

'You've seen Ron then.'

'Just then.'

'Let me explain-'

'No, and don't sit with me either. There's a spare seat by your *date*.'

'Harry! I had to – I had no choice,' Hermione started.

'Rubbish!' Harry shot, 'You had plenty of choice. But have fun won't you. Then again, that's what you've been doing all year, why stop now?'

Harry slammed himself down before Hermione could react. She looked close to tears but Harry looked away from her. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Hermione was spending more time looking over at him than at her work, but he ignored her. He ran straight out after the lesson and spent the rest of the day avoiding her.

In fact, he spent the next few days ignoring her. He didn't even care that Ron had had another chat to himself as he slept that ended with him crying and begging to be let go. But Harry didn't care. He was in so much agony that he was sure he'd implode. His chest felt heavy, he felt constantly sick and was growing tired of having to brush Hermione off wherever he went. On Sunday night, he just gave in.

He was sitting by the common room fire smoothing Crookshanks. The cat gave a nasty look as the portrait hole opened and Hermione came in. She swung her head from side to side, Harry could tell she was

looking for him, and when she saw him she marched over and sat in the seat next to him.

'I want to talk,' she said.

'I don't, go find Ron,' Harry hissed.

'Harry, please, let me explain.'

'Explain what?' Harry said, 'Ron asked you, you're going. End of story. Nothing to explain.'

'But I don't *want* to go with him, you need to know that. The only person I want to go with didn't ask me. I was going to ask him but didn't get round to it...then Ron cornered me.'

'Then why go with him?' Harry asked, the knot in his stomach loosening a little.

'He begged me, he looked so desperate that I just couldn't say no. I wish that-'

'What?'

Harry didn't get to find out what, as the portrait hole opened and Ron entered.

'Hi, date!' he said loudly as he came over, Harry's fist clenched under Crookshanks. Hermione looked like she could've died. Harry wished he could have.

'You got a date yet Harry?' Ron asked, 'Did you speak to Luna?'

Hermione's head shot round so fast she hurt herself.

'Luna,' she asked, rubbing her neck, 'you're taking her?'

'Well,' Harry started, he wanted to be cruel and say he was taking her, but he couldn't, 'Ron suggested it...said she wanted to go. I don't think I'll take anyone. I might just turn up and hope for the best. Maybe someone will take pity on me.'



Hermione's eyes turned so round that Harry couldn't tell if she was looking guilty, ashamed or sorrowful. Maybe a mixture of the three. She buried her head in a book from her bag and didn't look up for awhile. Harry could see her scribbling on a bit of parchment. Ron sat by the fire and started to read *Flying with the Cannons*, which he had borrowed from Harry.

'Do you want to test my answers?' Hermione asked suddenly.

'Sorry?' Harry asked.

'There's a test in this book, can you mark my answers for me?' she asked looking imploringly at him. He took the book reluctantly and found a piece of parchment over the page.

*Harry, come outside with me. I really need to speak properly to you. I know you do too.*

'You got question one wrong,' Harry said coldly, 'That's just assumption. This subject deals with facts, not what you *think you know*. I'm going to bed. Night.'

Harry took one last look at Hermione's face, flushed with desperation and walked towards the stairs. His head voluntarily stooped and he didn't have the heart, or the strength, to move it. His eyes were hot and moist but he didn't deny them either. He just hoped no-one would slip on the drops of water he was leaving in his wake.

## CHAPTER 16: THE CHRISTMAS INCIDENT

Hermione spent much of the next week trying to get Harry on his own. It had the strange effect of making both Harry and Ron work towards the same goal of keeping her away from him. Harry spent a lot of the time hiding, the boy's bathroom being his preferred haunt, and Ron redoubled his efforts to get Hermione to himself. She, in Harry's opinion, had realised she had finally pushed him too far away. Her desperation and obvious distress and being estranged from him was so blatant that people were starting to beg Harry to speak to her, just so she'd stop bugging them.

'Here you are, Harry,' Dean Thomas said one night before bed, 'its another note from Hermione. Make up with her soon, will you? I'm tired of being a postman for her.'

Harry took the note and set fire to it with his wand, like he had with so many others. He knew what she wanted say, but he wasn't about to hear it. As far as he was concerned, if she wasn't prepared to call off her date with Ron, which she'd made clear she wasn't, then she didn't have anything to say worth hearing. Still, Harry's insides ached at not being on speaking terms with her.

It had been a whole week since Ron had broken the news about his successful invitation to Hermione. This meant Harry would have to endure another two weeks of woe before the dreaded night itself, which Harry decided would already be a painful event. He imagined Hermione going to the ball in the most gorgeous dress with her hair sleek and her face all made up...and being with someone else. It was a thought that kept Harry awake at night.

The upshot of Harry's crumbling emotional state was a decided downturn in his Occlumency class. This annoyed him, too, as Dumbledore had said that Harry was nearly ready to take on Snape, but now his skills were falling away.

'What is it, Harry?' asked Dumbledore one lesson. Harry was on the floor, sweating and panting and weak. It was like he'd felt during Snape's Occlumency torture.

'It's nothing,' Harry lied.

'I think we should leave it there for tonight,' said Dumbledore solemnly.

'But I've only been here half an hour!' Harry protested, 'I can carry on!'

'I don't agree,' said Dumbledore, 'you aren't yourself, you haven't been for the past few lessons. I can't feel any happiness in you, Harry. You are too unfocused to be of any use tonight.'

Harry felt disappointed; the look of pity in Dumbledore's eyes was one he didn't need to see.

'Is it Miss Granger?' Dumbledore asked lightly.

'No,' Harry lied again, purposely avoiding Dumbledore's eyes.

'I know that it is. She has been to see me, you know.'

'Oh has she!' Harry yelled angrily, 'Came to say what a childish waster I am, did she.'

'She did not say that,' said Dumbledore, remaining infuriatingly calm in the face of Harry's rage, 'and nor do I believe she ever would. And you shouldn't believe such things either, not that I am convinced you do.'

'What would you know about it?' Harry spat.

'I have been breaking into your mind for months, Harry,' said Dumbledore, 'I know what you think about most...who you feel for most. Not that I'd need Occlumency for that; your affection for each other is so obvious every teacher, and probably most of the students, have noticed it.'

'Yeah, well,' moaned Harry, conceding that anger wouldn't stop Dumbledore's words being true, 'I just wish the affection was more than one way, that's all.'

'Do you truly believe that it isn't?'

'Mostly, yeah. I didn't used to but now...I just don't know. What should I do?'

'I have many years experience,' smiled Dumbledore, 'both as a man, myself, and as an observer of others. I know many things, but, still, affairs of the heart are some of the most complex to define, explain or advise upon. I have been Headmaster of this school for many years and in no place better than a school can you see the whole spectrum of emotions that we humans are prone to.'

'They are heightened by adolescent development, so are more profound and forceful, if I may be so bold, than anywhere else in life. One would hope that adults deal with their feelings in a much more orderly and mature fashion than young people with raging hormones and developing feelings would. Alas, this is not always the case. Love can do funny things to people.'

'But what about girls?' Harry pleaded, 'Love is complicated...not that I'm in love,' he added quickly in a deep, would-be masculine voice, 'but what about girls? Surely they aren't as complicated.'

Dumbledore laughed.

'That is where we all fall down, Harry. Underestimating the opposite sex. Women assume all men are shallow and two-dimensional; men assume all women think as they do. It is little wonder that so many lines get crossed in the murky waters of romance.'

'So, you can't advise me then?' Harry said blankly.

'Well, I will say this. True love will always triumph...in the end. If the connection is there then eventually the path will be walked. As for girls, only girls themselves can advise you there, and even the most knowledgeable woman doesn't know all there is no know about womanhood. I believe it is another thing studied in the Department of Mysteries....'

As Harry trundled out of Dumbledore's office and down the corridor, he made his mind up; if becoming an Auror was too difficult,

or he found the lifestyle didn't suit him, then he'd become an Unspeakable. He'd work in the Department of Mysteries and solve all the problems. Then he'd publish a book on women, love, jealousy and maybe one on the addiction of popping bubble wrap. They'd all be bestsellers.

Harry took a leisurely stroll around the corridors and eventually arrived in front of the portrait of the fat lady at around 9 o'clock. He gave the password, which he wished would change to '*Love is the enemy*,' and he clambered through into the common room. Harry expected everyone to be downstairs at dinner but he found Ginny and Ron hadn't yet gone down. Ginny seemed to have been talking before he'd come in.

'-perio!' she said. Harry was unnerved to find her wand pointing at Ron's head.

'What are you two doing?' Harry asked suspiciously.

'Oh, Harry! Nothing, just...just...a laughing jinx. I read it somewhere,' Ginny said through unfocused eyes; Harry noticed Ron's expression was vacant and blank, too.

'What does it do?' Harry implored, still suspicious.

'Makes you laugh...cheers you up. You're supposed to laugh now, Ron. If it worked. RON!' Ginny said vehemently.

'Ha ha ha!' Ron said blindly, his voice forced and squeaky.

'What was that incantation I heard?' Harry said a little more forcefully, not believing a word Ginny was saying.

'Um...it was...*sim-sum*...uh...*stuperio*!'

'Try it on me,' said Harry, 'I could use a laugh.'

'O-Ok,' Ginny stuttered.

She muttered the incantation with little confidence. Nothing happened.

'Not very good is it,' Harry snapped, 'what's really going on.'

'Nothing,' replied Ginny nervously, 'I knew it wouldn't work. It was a crap spell.'

'Then why'd it work on Ron? You told him to laugh and he did. It worked on him.'

'I don't know Harry,' whimpered Ginny desperately, 'I'm going to dinner. Are-you coming.'

'I want to know-'

The portrait hole opened. It was Hermione.

'Harry!' she breathed, 'Have you had dinner? Are you staying up here? We can talk in private.'

'No,' said Harry coldly, 'I'm just going down to eat, now. C'mon Gin,'

Hermione looked disconsolate. Harry wished she hadn't made him do these things to her. He had to do something, he was plagued by the fear of losing what they'd discovered between them.

'Look,' said Harry as Ginny and Ron flopped out of the portrait hole, 'I've told you what to do if you want to talk to me. If you don't want to do it, fine. But I'm not talking to you until this whole ball thing is over.'

'Ok, that's fair...I s'pose,' said Hermione sadly, 'but Harry can you answer me just two questions?'

'Just two.'

'Good. One is: have you lost the feelings you had for me? And two: are you going to invite anyone to the ball?'

She looked apprehensive and hopeful. Harry wanted so much to lie, but Hermione had a way of making him decent and honest.

Harry chuckled at the thought of Hermione making an honest man out of him.

'The answer is no to both questions,' said Harry sharply. Hermione seemed to smile just a fraction and Harry knew he'd done the right thing.

It was now just a week before the ball. Harry had made good on his promise not to invite anyone but would have liked to be involved with all the chatter surrounding it. Indeed, he would have loved to be arguing Hermione's merits against the dates the other boys had. Ron's defence of Hermione was insulting.

'Yeah, well,' Seamus said during their debate in the common room one evening, 'Hermione is nothing to Parvati. No offence...to both of you.'

'None taken,' Harry and Ron said together and, oddly, both laughed.

'I still can't believe she said she'd go with me,' continued Seamus, 'I mean...one of the best-looking girls in the year. My luck knows no bounds!'

'Surprised Lavender took longer than Parvati to get a date,' speculated Dean, 'Her and Parvati usually do things together but not this time. I asked her but she said she said she wanted to ask someone else first.'

'Then how come she *is* going with you?' Ron asked.

'Apparently, she asked the bloke and he said no. What an idiot!'

Harry didn't want to break Dean's euphoria of securing Lavender by confessing it was he that she'd asked first. She had hung back after Harry's practical defence class last Friday and popped the question then.

'Harry, can I have a word,' she asked.

'Yeah, sure,' Harry replied, 'Question about the class?'

'No,' she said, blushing madly, 'I was just wondering if you...I know you haven't got a date and I haven't either...just, do you want to go to the ball with me?'

Harry was too flabbergasted to answer right away.

'I mean...I know...' Lavender said quickly, 'I know that I'm...I'm *not Hermione Granger* and everything but we are friends, aren't we? I might take your mind off things. Might do you good...change of scenery and everything.'

She was smiling so sweetly at him that he was on the verge of saying yes. But he couldn't.

'Look,' Harry started slowly, 'I'm sorry, I just can't. It'd be an honour to go with you, I mean, you are one of the best looking girls in the school. But it wouldn't be right. It's not you...its just that I'm quite, you know, *hurt* about Hermione. It wouldn't be fair on you to say yes. For one, I'd be a crap date; two, my mind would be elsewhere and three, it wouldn't be right to be there when I was wishing I was with someone else. Do you get that? I know how horrible it sounds, and how I'll probably regret saying no once I see you in your ball gown, but I'm going to have to. You deserve to go with someone who will respect you totally all night and dedicate themselves to just you. I cant promise to do that, and like you said, we're friends, and it would be disrespectful to that. I'm sorry.'

'Well,' smiled Lavender, 'at least you're honest. I didn't expect you to say yes but I thought I'd try anyway,' she moved to the door and looked back over her shoulder, 'just between you and me though, Hermione Granger must be crazy. Ron Weasley over you? Psycho. Just wish I could turn your head like she does, maybe then you'd go with me. I'd never let you out of my sight if I were her, knowing how she does that you like her. Just hope she's worth it.'

And that was it. She disappeared around the corner leaving Harry red faced and confused. Just how many girls did like him? He was certain of one thing, though; Hermione definitely was worth it. All



the pain, the shame, the suffering. He'd endure it all if it meant she'd come back to him in the end.

In the couple of days before the ball the owl post in the morning was more chaotic than usual. Hogwarts had become number one customer of *Miss Butterfly's Boutique*. The amount of make up, hair products and party outfits and accessories flooding into the school was a sight to be seen, almost as much as the girls' haste to hide all their things, not wanting to let their secrets out before the big night. One surprise was Justin Finch-Fletchley, who was the recipient of a full set of face products including, eyeliner, mascara and foundation. He didn't spend much time in public after these gifts were dropped on his table at breakfast.

Harry, for not wanted to be left out of the post, ordered his Christmas presents a month early. He had bought Ron a set of replica Chudley Cannon robes and a book he hoped Hermione would love. She had certainly liked his book present last year, he just didn't want to be seen hitting the same well too many times.

The day of the ball finally came around and lessons were cancelled before lunch; the absence of so many of the girls from these classes meant that teachers felt it pointless to teach the class with it so empty. Harry again noticed how many girls Hogwarts seemed to hold, noticeable only by the fact it looked so empty when they were all off beautifying themselves.

'What do they *do* for all those hours?' Ron asked incredulously as they discussed it over lunch.

'I dunno, must be delicate, though,' Harry speculated.

'And painful,' Ron added, 'Ginny's got this jar of weird gel called *Wax Works Hair Removal*. Smells like honeysuckle but I heard Ginny scream when she uses it. But she never seems bald after it.'

'I don't think its meant for head hair,' explained Harry.

'Oh...*oh!*' s Ron said as it dawned on him, '*Down there! Ouch! That must kill!*'

'No!' yelled Harry quite disgusted, 'Its meant for leg hair I think.'

'Oh, I get it,' said Ron, his face the colour of his hair, 'that might not be too bad.'

'I wouldn't wanna do it,' said Harry forcefully.

They continued the conversation all though lunch, each speculation growing more and more absurd with every passing moment. Eventually, they called a halt to the debate, deciding they'd gone to far when discussing skin grafts and acne plucking for improving the skin. These seemed a bit too impossible even for the mad girls they knew.

The ball was due to start at 7:30 and all students had to be there at that time. Harry pulled out his bottle green dress robes, pleased to find that they weren't creased and still looked brand new. Hardly surprising when they'd only been used once. Ron's new dress robes, bought with Harry's Triwizard winnings, were a dusky blue and very shiny. Ron spent a huge amount of time on his hair, lathering it with strange foam that made his hair look like it had been glued in place. He broke several teeth off his comb when he tried to run it through his hair, eventually giving up and letting it flop down.

'Its no good,' he said giving up, 'my hair's useless. We're in the same boat there, aren't we?'

Harry had no choice but to agree. Still, it had worked for his dad once upon a time, maybe old trends could come back into style. Then he would be a fashion icon. He had a disturbing mental image of himself trotting down a catwalk to flashing cameras, his hair flowing behind him in a breeze, sunglasses perched down his nose.

'Let's go down!' Harry said suddenly, desperate to escape his catwalk self.

'How come you didn't get a date?' Ron asked as they walked down the stairs towards the common room, 'I bet loads of girls would have gone with you. You're a star after all.'

'A couple asked me,' Harry replied diplomatically, hiding the fact he knew he been asked by more people than Ron and Hermione combined, 'I just couldn't be bothered. Too much hassle, you know? I get talked about enough as it is, I just fancied a night off from it all.'

'Don't blame you, mate,' said Ron nodding vigorously.

They entered the common room to find it like a stopping point; dates meeting each other, admiring each other, then speeding towards the Great Hall to show each other off. Hermione was there already; Harry had to catch his breath before he spoke to her. Ron, Harry thought, should have looked more impressed than he did. Hermione looked fabulous after all.

She had obviously bought a new robe to replace her periwinkle blue one that she wore to the Yule Ball. Harry remembered that girls loved to shop, especially for clothes, so it should have been little surprise to see Hermione's new outfit. This was a tight dress of deep scarlet with twinkly bits around the neck and chest. It had long sleeves and flowed out at the base. Harry was hypnotised.

'Hi,' she said breathlessly, 'You look lovely, Harry. Shame you haven't got someone to enjoy you. Where's Ron?'

'Talking to Parvati and Seamus,' said Harry, still goggling at Hermione, 'You look stunning. There's no other word for it. Just hope Ron appreciates you.'

Hermione beamed for a few moments before Ron whisked her away.

'Are you coming down?' Ron asked.

'Yeah, you two go on though,' said Harry, 'couples go in together. I might try and slip in unnoticed when it's started. Maybe I can sneak in undetected. I think I'm the only one without a date.'

Hermione looked heartbroken but Harry gave her an encouraging smile. She looked so pretty that he forgot he wasn't speaking to her.

'She looks nice,' said Lavender as Harry stared longingly at Hermione as she walked away.

'Yep,' said Harry resignedly, before noticing Lavender, 'You look great too. Told you that you would.'

'Yeah, well,' Lavender giggled, 'see what you're missing? All this could have been yours! Ah well, next time I just have to fall for someone who fancies me for a change!'

She surprised Harry by giving him a little peck on the cheek and he cheered up slightly. Dean whipped her away from Harry, beaming uncontrollably and giving him a thumbs up. Harry winked back and Dean guided Lavender through the portrait hole. The common room emptied slowly and Harry was left alone, thinking how silly he looked in a magic school, on his own, in a dress. There was a joke there somewhere, Harry just couldn't find it.

He waited for about half an hour before deciding he couldn't avoid it any longer. He traipsed down the corridors, ignoring Peeves even when he sent a gust of wind up from under Harry that sent the hem of his dress robes over his head. Harry hurriedly disentangled himself from his robes, which turned out to be quite a job, as Peeves' maniacal laughter echoed along the empty hall. Harry looked around to make sure nobody had seen him in his underwear, then made for the Great Hall.

It was dark inside with only a few hundred of the usual thousands of candles lighting up the place. The house tables were stacked against one wall, replaced by many, many smaller tables, most of which were occupied by students. The large space in front of the teacher's table had been converted into a massive dance floor, filled with jiving students. Most of the girls seemed to be having the time of their lives while most of the boys seemed awkward and ungainly, casting hopeless glances at their friends for guidance. Problem was, most of their friends were about as bad as they were leaving them all a state. All except Justin Finch-Fletchley who was dancing madly, but with a respectable degree of coordination, in robes of mauve.

The music, Harry noticed, wasn't being provided by a live band, like at the Yule Ball. Instead, a huge grey and black funnel-shaped object was perched on a raised platform at the top of the dance floor. Students were going up to it, scribbling on bits of parchment and depositing them in the funnel. Harry realised that this was some kind of jukebox and students were requesting songs. This became annoying quite quickly, as the current *Weird Sisters* hit was played three times in seven songs.

Harry slinked to a table on the edge of the hall, just away from the dance floor. He noticed all his friends were already up dancing. Ron was doing a kind of manic jig to a swing-type song while Hermione swayed on the spot next to Parvati. Seamus was trying to join Ron in his psychotic jumping about but couldn't seem to find the right time to jump in. Hermione was looking around dejectedly, Harry hoped she was looking to find him. The caged beast in his chest jumped up, as she suddenly beamed as she spotted him and waved exuberantly. Harry sort of saluted with his index figure but declined her request to join them on the dance floor.

As the night wore on and the atmosphere became more drowsy and relaxed, Harry thought going to these things alone wasn't all bad. He had been brought copious amount of Butterbeer by people feeling sorry for him not getting a date, and those he turned down. He had even got up to dance after Ron and Seamus demanded he, Hermione and Dean taught them the dance to the Macarena. Harry was glad Justin Finch-Fletchley knew it because he didn't have a clue.

As he was sat down most of the time, Hermione had manipulated her dancing group to move near to Harry. This meant he could talk to them quite often, especially when Luna made Ron chat to her. Harry found he liked the situation quite well and was able to chat to Hermione quite a bit. He was in a good enough mood to forgive her going with Ron and the whole evening was going well. Somewhere, deep inside, Harry knew it couldn't last.

There was a crash over on one side of the room that caught most people's attention. Harry was stunned to find Cho Chang stumbling drunkenly around the room. She was swaying and falling

into chairs and tables knocking them over. Several people were laughing but it was when she spotted Harry that she was pushed over the edge.

'I'd be careful if I were you,' Ernie MacMillan warned as he walked past Harry, 'she got hold of some Ogden's Old Fire whiskey, the Slytherins have been flogging it all night. She's *totally* drunk and she's been saying few choice things about you all night. Here she comes...'

Ernie ducked away as Cho tumbled into the table next to Harry's.

'Wh-what you – *hic* – laughing at – *hic* -' she said drunkenly, her eyes bleary and unfocused.

'Nothing,' said Harry, a grin fighting to get on his face.

'Don't know – *hic* – why you're laugh – *hic* –ing,' Cho continued, 'got nothing to – *hic* – laugh at.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Harry asked.

'It means – *hic* – that you're a...a...*joke* really,' Cho said nastily, 'I cant believe I liked you. You're so *boring* and so *minging*. You cant – *hic* – talk to girls, you have silly hair and you are the worst kisser in school.'

'And I bet you've tried plenty!' Hermione stabbed, her face fuming and angry.

'And *you!*' Cho rounded on Hermione, 'You can stay – *hic* – out of it. *Darling Hermione*. If it wasn't for you...nevermind. It doesn't matter – *hic* – Harry would have been a rubbish boyfriend anyway. He kisses like a troll probably would and his breath smells.'

'Ok ok, that's enough.' It was Michael Corner, Cho's boyfriend, 'Sorry about this. She can't take the drink. Ignore her, she's been talking like this all night.'

'About me?' Harry said aghast.

'Well...mostly, yeah,' Michael Corner said with a sniping grin, before he whisked Cho away, who was still shouting insults in Harry's direction.

Hermione made to smooth Harry's arm to console him but Ron dragged her away.

'C'mon its slow dance time,' Ron said briskly, before tossing Hermione around in a painful sort of waltz to a song Harry recognised as *Careless Whisper*, a Muggle song.

Hermione kept sending pained and sorry looks in Harry's direction, but he was too humiliated to acknowledge them. Cho was still shouting obscenities about Harry to anyone who'd listen, and everyone that could hear. Hermione seemed to be guiding Ron towards Harry; Ron was fighting to take her the other way.

'Oh, look what you've gone Granger,' Pansy Parkinson said in a horrible baby voice, much like Bellatrix Lestrange, 'look what you've done to Potter!'

Hermione looked quickly and questioningly from Harry to Pansy and back again.

'What are you on about?' Hermione shouted.

'Look how depressed he is? And its all your fault. You've broken his little heart. Awww! All the disasters he's had in his life, losing his parents, living with Muggles, being shockingly ugly. Now you've broken him in half by dumping him for Weasley...what an insult! I hate him but even I feel sorry for him on this one. I know Potter's bad, but Weasley? I thought you could sink no lower, Mudblood!'

Pansy laughed as Blaise Zabini guided her away. Hermione looked so mortified that Harry was sure she'd cry. But Ron finally found the impetus he needed and steered her across the hall. The insults didn't seem to have registered with him.

Hermione positively sprinted back across the hall once the song had finished and sat down next to Harry. He spoke before she did.

'Don't listen to Pansy,' he said quickly, 'the day to start listening to what the Slytherins say is the day we deserve to be shot!'

'But was she wrong?' Hermione asked apprehensively.

'Not on...everything,' Harry said truthfully; Hermione bit her lip, looking like she wanted to die. Ron came back over and sat down quite jovially, not caring that Hermione and scarpered from him at the first chance she got. Harry thought he wore a look that said his night's work was done.

A few songs later and a tune came on that Harry recognised. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon weren't big lovers of music, apart from one act. Someone called Simon and Garfunkle. Harry could recall many Christmas and New Years parties at Privet Drive when both Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would have a little too much sherry and sing spine-chilling duets of their favourite group's songs. The one playing now was the only one he liked.

'I know this one,' he said vaguely to Hermione, '*Bridge Over Troubled Water*. Its quite nice.'

'Ron,' said Luna coming up for the umpteenth time, 'come and dance with me.'

Ron didn't resist at all, not that he done the fourteen other times Luna had asked him to dance, and left Harry and Hermione alone. By this time most of the other students had left the hall, some for bed but most, Harry suspected, for late night shenanigans in the most secluded spots Hogwarts had to offer. Hermione got up and Harry prepared to say good night. Instead, though, Hermione stood in front of him and held out her hands. Harry's heart started to pump hard and fast under his ribs.

'Dance with me, Harry,' she said. It wasn't a request or a statement, or even a demand. But it was something Harry had no choice, or no objection for that matter, but to do. Hermione led Harry



to the dance floor; he shuddered all over when she guided both his hands around her and placed them on the small of her back. Harry's breath was coming so quickly now that it was making his lips dry and his tongue itchy. Hermione put her hands around Harry's neck and drew him into her, placing her head softly against his chest. He could feel her chest moving up and down as fast as his was and knew all the nervousness he felt she was experiencing too. He just hoped she was as comfortable as he was.

Harry held her tight as they swayed in time to the music. Harry had forgotten the song by now, captivated by the warmth of Hermione's body, the lush scent of her hair as his face was buried in it. He lost control one time and kissed the top of her head, recoiling quickly as soon as he did. He was glad to find she didn't move; either she didn't mind it or didn't feel it. Harry was ok with either option.

Harry wasn't sure how long they'd danced but knew that the song had changed at least twice and they hadn't moved. It was only when the music stopped and Dumbledore announced to the remaining slow dancing couples that it was 12:30 and bedtime. Hermione took Harry's hand and led him away.

'Lets go upstairs,' she said with a smile.

Harry followed her, not strong enough in his ability to think to do anything else. He noticed that he and Hermione were one of only four couples left and that Ron was nowhere to be seen. Strange sounds of muffled giggling and awkward movement seemed to be coming from everywhere; empty classrooms, broom cupboards, even behind suits of armour and statues. Harry knew that few people would take Dumbledore's advice and go to bed.

Harry and Hermione entered the common room to find it empty, which Harry thought was surprising. The fire was still roaring so he and Hermione sat down on the hearthrug. At first, Harry couldn't look at her, not really sure what to say. He was so lost in emotions that were dominating him that he couldn't manage speech.

'What's up?' Hermione asked eventually, her questioning eyes peering into him.

'Nothing.' Harry said, his voice going oddly squeaky.

'Are you thinking about what Cho said?' Hermione asked, her tone almost seductive.

'Which bit?' Harry said wearily.

'The bit about you being a bad kisser?' she said tentatively.

'A little,' replied Harry, where was this going?

'Well, I think she's wrong,' said Hermione defiantly.

'How'd you know? She could be right. I haven't exactly got a point of reference have I?'

'Well,' said Hermione slowly, weighing up every word as if debating whether or not to say what she was about to, 'I have an idea. How about you...' she gulped heavily, '...um, practice...on me. Then I can tell you if you're bad or not.'

Harry felt his fingers trembling where his leg was pressing down on them. His chest was shaking so much that Harry thought at any moment it would break free and smash through the window and sail to a wild life in the Forbidden Forest with the old Ford Anglia.

'How-how will you know?' Harry stuttered nervously.

'Call it woman's intuition,' said Hermione calmly, her tone leaving Harry wondering why she wasn't more nervous.

'O-OK,' Harry stuttered again, 'what do you want me to do?'

'Right,' said Hermione gleefully, shifting up so that her knees touched Harry's, sending a wave of flutters through his body, 'all you do is lean in slowly. Moisten your lips a little, brush your nose against mine then just move your head till our lips touch and press lightly. Got it?'

'How do you know so much about this?' Harry asked shrewdly.

'Oh well,' said Hermione matter-of-factly, 'I go around Hogwarts snogging every boy I find! Where do I get all my information from, Harry?'

'Books?'

'Yes. It just so happens that I read a copy of *Witch Weekly* that Lavender had. *Tips of the Kiss* was the article. Very informative. Shall we try it?'

Harry wasn't sure if he nodded or if his head just spasmed. He moved his head in slowly...Hermione did the same. Harry tried to line up his head with hers so that their noses would touch like she said. He saw her close her eyes, so he did the same. It was much harder to guide in the dark. Then it happened.

'Ouch, Harry!' Hermione giggled.

'Sorry,' mumbled Harry, rubbing his nose from where he'd banged it ungainly into Hermione's.

'Its ok,' she said, still giggling, 'lets try again.'

This time Harry was able to hold his head steady. This was despite the pressure and pulses spinning around inside it. His stomach was quivering so much he felt like he was going to be sick, but he knew that this time he'd do it. Second time was, after all, a charm.

Harry thought that Hermione must have pulled away because he couldn't find her face and felt like he'd been moving in for ages. He was about to open his eyes and look when he felt his nose brush against hers. Her skin was soft and warm and the first contact sent tickles of electricity through him causing his body to shake, It didn't matter this time though, as he felt Hermione's do the same.

He let the tip of his nose slide down the side of Hermione's towards her cheek. They were too close, now, and Harry was definite in the conviction that his body was on the verge of collapse. He felt Hermione's hands move into his lap and grab his own, both sets

trembling furiously. Soon, Harry felt his nose touch Hermione's cheek and the important part was coming up.

He tilted his head up slightly and slowly, feeling Hermione do the same. Then the connection. It wasn't like with the noses, no harsh bumps and embarrassment. This time Harry felt his lips smooth against Hermione's as they found each other. Harry's first feeling, after euphoric brain explosion, was that this was nothing like it was with Cho. This was right, this was perfect...the way it was meant to be. And he loved it.

For a few moments they stayed like that, lips frozen and pressed lightly against each other. Then, Hermione applied a little more pressure and Harry responded in kind. Hermione started to move her lips around slowly, occasionally breaking with parts of Harry's only to return with more pressure. After a minute or so, Harry felt Hermione's hand snake up his arm and around his neck, getting lost in his hair as Hermione tilted his head. The passion was more than Harry could bare, not that he wanted it to stop. But, as Harry had found out in the past, there can be no pleasure without pain.

'Just cant help yourself can you!'

It was Ron and he was furious. Harry and Hermione flew apart quickly but neither had an excuse this time.

'Why do you have to have everything? She was my date!' Ron screamed.

'Yeah, but that isn't my lipstick on your cheek,' said Hermione quietly.

'I thought you wanted to be friends!' Ron yelled ignoring Hermione, his voice, Harry noticed, was higher and shriller than ever, 'And you do this!'

'I do want to be friends,' Harry said getting to his feet, 'I'm sorry. I just can't fight this anymore. I've tried all year to deny it.'

'Deny what?' Ron spat.

'I care for Hermione,' said Harry, 'Its too much. You were right when you said she's all I think about. She is, from when I get up to when I go to bed. I can't stop it.'

'So you think nicking her on my date was ok do you?'

'No, but she should've been with me. Don't think you would have noticed anyway, not with Luna distracting you!'

'Don't you compare Luna to this...to this,' Harry knew Ron was winding up to a punishing insult, 'this...MUDBLOOD!'

Ron's next thought, Harry considered later, must have been what it felt like to fall face first onto the flagged stone of the common room floor. Because this was where Ron was moments later, sporting a nose now slightly off centre. Harry, despite his knuckles starting to ache, dived at Ron but Hermione got between them. Ron kicked out under Hermione's arm and caught Harry in the stomach, sending him reeling back and over an armchair.

Ron was up and had his wand out. Harry dived behind a table as Ron's spell shattered an empty Butterbeer bottle. Harry whipped out his own wand, he knew Ron was really no match for him.

*'Expelliarmus!'* Harry yelled.

Ron's wand soared in the air and he stumbled backwards into Hermione.

*'Stupefy!'* Harry bellowed.

What Ron did next Harry was sure would end their friendship for ever. As Harry began the incantation, Ron grabbed Hermione and dragged her in front of him. Harry couldn't stop himself and the force of the spell, due to his anger at Ron, was strong enough to fling Hermione out of Ron's grip and into the wall. She was knocked cold, a trickle of blood coming from her mouth.

*'Hermione!'* Harry whimpered meekly as he raced over, 'Get away!' he screamed at Ron, who looked genuinely distraught.

'Harry...I'm sorry...I don't know what's happening to me,' stuttered Ron.

'Just get away,' hissed Harry.

'Harry...'

Harry was overcome with a fury so terrible that his scar prickled and he had the impression he was sending Voldemort some powerful emotion. He took Ron by the shoulders and cracked his head against his own. It had seemed a good idea at the time but now his head was searing in pain. Ron stumbled away, tears in his eyes and up the dormitory stairs. Harry, tears in his own eyes, scooped up Hermione and clambered with her through the portrait hole. He would take her to the hospital wing wishing two things. One was that Madame Pomfrey was awake; the second, was that Hermione would find some way to forgive him. She just had to. If she didn't then either he or Ron would be soon going to meet Sirius.

## Chapter 17: Malfoy's Promise

*She isn't dead, I only stunned her. Madame Pomfrey will see her right in a second. She won't be dead...I haven't killed her.*

Wild, panicky, illogical, half-formed thoughts such as these raced around Harry's head as he hauled Hermione's limp, but still warm, body along the empty corridors. It was cold and dark, Harry's heavy footsteps echoed and reverberated around him and the embers of the once flaming torches crackled vaguely as they died out. It was twisted luck, Harry thought, that he had spent a great deal of his Hogwarts life getting injured; it allowed him to find his way to the Hospital Wing in the dark.

It was also quite alarming that Harry was able to stumble all the way from the Gryffindor Common room to the hospital wing, which was quite a distance, without running into Filch, Mrs Norris or any of the teachers. Especially when he making so much noise. Harry considered the possibility that most of the teachers were patrolling the more hidden parts of Hogwarts looking for loved-up, or lusted up, couples attempting to break the most sacred of the school rules. After all, the boys were deemed too untrustworthy to enter the girl's dormitory. Harry had to agree, he would have been thinking to try and break that rule about now, if Ron hadn't interrupted him...

He couldn't even think about Ron, or what he wanted to do to him. If his wild thoughts about Hermione's condition were dominating his mind then thinking about painful revenges to visit upon Ron pulled a close second. He had called Hermione a Mudblood, which was bad enough, but to pull her in front of Harry's spell to protect himself, that was something else. A crime Harry doubted would have an excruciating enough punishment to suit it. Although Filch's desire to hang students by their thumbs till death did now have its merits...

Harry reached the Hospital Wing to find it busy with students. The room seemed to have been divided into sections, each catering for a bizarre affliction. There was a section dedicated to girls who had tried to curse acne and pimples from their faces, and were now left with angry boils and sore craters. There was a section for boys who had clearly tried to charm their muscles into growing, leaving many

looking like their biceps had been inflated to cartoon-hero level, and some were even floating around and bouncing off the ceiling.

Another section was full of girls with what looked like large breezblocks around their chests. Harry wasn't sure what these girls had tried to do until he overheard Madame Pomfrey speaking to one.

'Just try to use tissue next time, much easier and much less risky!'

Another group, a mix of boys and girls, were sat on beds in one corner, all crying and holding their chests. Madame Pomfrey explained to Harry what their ailment was.

'Broken Hearts, I'm afraid,' she said sadly, 'its what happens when a Love Potion backfires, or an Attraction Charm doesn't work. You can try all you like but if the heart and soul aren't in it, on both sides, it just doesn't work. And the pain is torturous for those poor people. I did it myself, once. Love is hardest on youth I think. Now dear...what has happened here!'

'She was Stunned,' said Harry dismally, 'can you help her?'

'*Stunned?*' Madame Pomfrey cried, 'How did she-'

'Does it matter?' Harry cut across, 'Can you do anything?'

'Well – yes...yes, of course. I suppose this is because of a row is it? With another boy perhaps? Had one in here earlier, two girls fighting over a boy. Scram marks on the face, clumps of hair pulled out, teeth knocked out and pride severely dented.'

'Why?'

'One of the girls ripped the other one's dress and she was...well, shall we say...*exposed*. This Muggle trend of ignoring underwear in favour of looking fashionable, I shall never agree with it. More trouble than its worth.'

Madame Pomfrey helped Harry to move Hermione to a bed, still muttering her discontent with young people's fashion ideas. She



pointed her wand at Hermione and muttered '*enervate!*' Hermione came around immediately, startled at being in the Hospital Wing.

'Harry! Are you ok? What are we doing – oh my,' said Hermione sitting up quickly, which apparently was a bad idea as she came over rather dizzy. Madame Pomfrey pushed her back down and told her to rest; Harry was just glad she was all right.

'What happened?' Hermione asked, 'One minute we were in the common room, then I'm here. Last thing I remember was you and – Harry! What happened with Ron, where is he?'

'Back in the dormitory,' Harry said, 'he dragged you in front of my spell when I tried to Stun him. It hit you instead. I'm sorry...do you hate me? You do don't you?'

'No, don't be so silly,' she said encouragingly, taking his hand from the bed and squeezing it tight, 'I just wanted to make sure you weren't hurt. How did you get that scar on your forehead?'

'Are you kidding?' Harry asked in incredulously.

'No, not *that* scar,' said Hermione with a grin, 'that other one. You've got a big red mark in the middle of your head, didn't you know?'

'Must've been from where I head butted Ron,' said Harry vaguely.

'Where you what!' Hermione yelled making several people look up, 'What do you mean *head butted Ron*?'

'Well, he was crouching down after you were hit by my spell...I was really angry...it was all I could think to do.'

'You head butted him? *You head butted him!* Harry, what is the matter with you?'

'I'm sorry,' mumbled Harry, 'but it was his fault. He made me hurt you. If anything worse had happened...then worse things would have happened to Ron, trust me on that.'

Harry wasn't sure if it was the news of the head butt, his dark tone of voice or his declaration of protecting Hermione by using violence against his best friend, but she drew him into a hug so tight it felt like she was trying to squeeze the anger out of him. It seemed to work; Harry hugged her back as she muttered about what she was going to have to do with him. Harry had a few ideas himself, but thought that maybe now wasn't the best time to air them.

'Well,' Madame Pomfrey said as she swept past them, a rare smile on her face, 'at least one couple managed to stay *in* love tonight!'

Harry and Hermione just smiled unblinkingly at each other.

Harry had to leave Hermione under the care of the matron that night and so trundled back to the Gryffindor common room alone. He bumped into his least favourite person at Hogwarts on his return trip.

'Out of bed again, Potter,' said Snape silkily. He, like all the teachers, had dressed up in fancy dress for the party and looked quite menacing in his Sheriff of Nottingham costume, 'Five points from Gryffindor. And, though I can't see her,' Snape said looking around Harry then feeling the air, that Harry knew was an attempt to find an Invisibility Cloaked person, 'Miss Granger-Potter must be with you somewhere, or at some time. Five points for the likely acts of disgusting fornication you have undoubtedly engaged in. It should be more, really, considering that it is a school rule. And, if you dare to insult me back, more points will be taken off for that. Now get to bed, Mr Potter.'

Snape snarled before whisking past Harry and disappearing silently into the hush of Hogwarts. Harry stormed back to Gryffindor Tower, his warm fuzzy feeling left back with Hermione in the Hospital Wing. Harry climbed the dormitory stairs, not caring how many people he woke up with the noise. He slammed into the dormitory to find Neville and Dean asleep, Ron feigning sleep, but two shapes jumped under Seamus' hangings.

'I'd be careful if I were you,' said Harry at the giggles of Seamus and a voice undoubtedly belonging to Parvati, 'Snape's on

the warpath. The teachers have ways of knowing what's going on. I'd be a little quieter if I were you.'

Harry couldn't help grinning at the giggles anyway as he tumbled into bed. The noises coming from Seamus' bed reminded him of the good things that had happened that night. As he lay, still in his dress robes, on top of his covers he forgot about Snape and his anger. Who cares about losing house points, he thought, after what has happened tonight.

He was going over it all in his mind, the dance, the kiss, even the hug in the hospital wing. He was comparing it to what had happened with Cho, how he was unsure how he felt about it, nervous about seeing her again. This was different; he wanted to see Hermione, right now. He wanted to kiss her again, but for longer this time and with no interruptions. Speaking of which...

'Harry, can I talk to you?'

'Get lost, Ron.'

'Harry, please...'

'*Harry, please!*' Harry mocked, 'Harry nothing. I've got absolutely nothing to say to you. What you did...I didn't think you'd ever do something like that. Not to me, not to her. How could you?'

'That's what I want to talk about,' Ron said, 'I need your help, Harry.'

'Tough,' Harry replied, despite the Hermione-like voice in his mind telling him that he really should hear Ron out.

'I deserve this, I know I do,' Ron said.

It was something in his voice that seemed to crack through Harry's resistance. It wasn't high-pitched and shrill anymore, it was his normal voice and it was afraid. Harry couldn't ever recall Ron asking for help on anything. Even homework. It was this more than anything that made Harry consider Ron's request.

'I might talk to you in the morning,' he said, 'I'm too tired now.'

'I want to talk now. I need to talk now,' said Ron, his voice laced with anxiety, 'and I know you won't sleep. Too busy thinking about your kiss with Hermione.'

'His what?' yelled Dean and Seamus together, even Parvati popped her head out of the hangings, though she was covering herself from her neck down.

'I don't want to talk now,' said Harry, the heat rising in his face, 'and I won't. I'll talk to you in the morning. If I talk to you now I'll probably end up smacking you again. And you'll deserve it again.'

'You'll do what?' came the eavesdroppers chorus.

'Go to sleep! All of you. Miss Patil! Back to your own dormitory immediately. And put something on, girl!'

Harry quickly fell asleep, this despite Professor McGonagall berating Parvati for what sounded like the entire length of Gryffindor Tower.

By the next morning it appeared that several of Harry's secrets had leaked out. Despite being alone during the incident, almost all the details of Harry's kiss with Hermione had flown around Gryffindor Tower, and subsequently around the school. Harry wasn't sure how much of this was frighteningly accurate guesswork and elaboration on rumour or if someone had actually been watching them. He suspected that the non-stop flapping mouths of Seamus, Dean and Parvati contributed to the reports, but they were still bafflingly correct.

Harry's other secret was that people were guessing the source of his and Ron's injuries. The mark on his forehead had now developed into a large and puffy lump that stuck out above his nose in a most unsightly way. Ron, however, was much worse off. Harry had never before head butted a person; he had scrapped with Dudley when they were younger and thrown pointless punches and resorting to biting when Dudley hurt him. He had also punched Malfoy several

times during his Hogwarts career, something that he ranked up with his proudest achievements.

But head butts were new to him and, despite the pain it caused him and the lump it gave him, Harry decided this was something he was good at, if Ron's face was anything to go by. He hadn't gone to Madame Pomfrey in the night but he was in so much agony that he had to go before breakfast. Harry saw him enter the Great Hall and felt the slightest pang of guilt when he realised what he had done. Ron had bloomed two spectacular black eyes that were a deep mixture of violet and dark blue and his nose was crooked from where it had been broken.

'You look terrible,' said Harry as Ron sat down.

'Thanks,' said Ron, a sort of self-impressed smile on his face, 'you look awful too. Nice lump you gave yourself. I saw Hermione by the way, she's fine. She'll be along in a minute.'

It was strange sitting there talking to Ron like this; it was as if their fight was a watershed of the angst between them and it now seemed resolved. It was as if the fight had been just what they needed.

'Look,' said Harry, 'sorry about your nose. And your eyes. I shouldn't have done that.'

'Don't worry,' said Ron grinning, 'it was a good butt; Fred and George would be proud of my black eyes. I'm not even going to start saying sorry about what I did to Hermione. I know sorry just doesn't cover what I said or did. And I mean all year, not just last night.'

'What do you mean?'

'Everyone knows, Harry,' said Ron tentatively, 'about you and Hermione. It's obvious. The teachers know, people in other houses know. It's been a shock that it only took you two till last night to realise it.'

'What, exactly?'

'That you two are mad about each other. I've known it since I saw you in Diagon Alley before term started. There's just something between you...I feel it every time you're together. Literally. Its like a heat.'

'Is it? Then why have you been stopping us getting together?'

'You *are* together, you just haven't said it yet. I don't know why I've been acting so weird. I've wanted you to get together for ages. I knew Hermione wasn't interested in me and so I stopped bothering, but something kept me at it. I wanted to come up and tell you to ask her out, but every time I saw you it was like I was taken over...something making me be horrible to you.'

'So what's changed?'

'Dunno. I'm just able to say it this time. I don't know why. I've felt like it since last night. I was on my way back up to the common room after the ball...I was going to just tell you to go to Hermione and tell her you're in love with her. Don't look like that! You know are! When I went through the portrait hole I just lost it, I was taken over again. But its gone now. I don't know why.'

Harry could sense the sincerity in Ron's voice, even if part of him still wanted to be angry with him. Ron wore a look of such sorrow and shame that Harry was forgiving him in spite of himself. He was still angry with Ron for what he'd done but that familiar voice in the back of his head was guiding him against his better judgement.

'I'm just sorry for being a total prat all year. I just hope I haven't messed things up between you and Hermione,' said Ron pitifully.

'Don't worry, you haven't,' said Hermione.

Harry stood up and span to face Hermione and was hugging her before he knew what he was doing. Several people were giggling nearby and a chorus of girls were swooning somewhere. Harry didn't care; Hermione was ok and was hugging him back in front of all these people.

'Harry, can I sit down now please?' Hermione giggled.

'Oh, yeah...sorry,' said Harry.

'Are you two talking?' Hermione asked hopefully.

Harry and Ron looked at each other for a minute.

'Yeah,' said Ron.

Hermione clapped her hands together and drew them both into a hug.

'Lets not fight anymore, ok?' Hermione pleaded.

Harry had to agree. It was much easier to live in peace than to exist in war.

It was a few days before the end of term. Ron was talking excitedly about going home for Christmas; his family were going out to Norway to visit Charlie. Ron said he would look out for Norbert and bring back a photo for Hagrid. Harry wasn't overly exuberant about Christmas, though, for not only was Ron going home but Hermione was going skiing again to make up for last year's fiasco trip.

'I can cancel it, you know,' said Hermione trying to console Harry, 'I told you, skiing isn't really my thing. I'm not great at it, to be honest. I'd much rather stay here...with you. It'd be great, actually, because we'd probably be on our own.'

'No,' said Harry, 'I don't want you to do that. No, I didn't mean that...I do want you to do that. I'd love you to stay with me but, its not fair. I won't ask you and I don't want to ruin another Christmas for you.'

'What are you on about?' Hermione cried, 'You didn't ruin last Christmas for me. You made it better for me actually; I didn't think I'd get to see you at all. I jumped at the chance when Dumbledore said I could go and see you, spend the holidays with you. No, I'm decided, I'll stay here.'

'No,' said Harry firmly, 'You're going away with your parents. And that's that.'

Hermione wasn't herself for the next few days. She kept trying to persuade Harry to change his mind, but he wasn't about to. He decided that he deprived Mr and Mrs Granger of Hermione enough as it was and he had to concede some time. Then, one day before the school broke up, Hermione became obsessed again.

'I've had a great idea, Harry!' she said running into lunch from her Arithmancy class, 'I've solved all our problems! I can't believe I didn't think of it before.'

Hermione was positively skipping around the place, her eyes wide and alive and a smile etched onto her face.

'Well?' Harry asked after a while, 'What's your plan?'

'Well, I thought...you know, what if you come skiing with me?' Hermione said brightly, 'Its perfect. Mum and Dad get to see me and we get to be together. Away from here. What do you think?'

Harry didn't answer at once. He wasn't convinced that Hermione's plan was the best one ever. Still, it did have its merits. The problem was that Harry was starting to feel he was encroaching on the Granger family a little more than was welcome. He didn't want to push the boat too far. He voiced these concerns to Hermione who shot him down at once.

'Don't be ridiculous,' she said, 'Mum and Dad love you, they said so when you stayed over the summer. They wont mind you coming. Especially if it'll make me happy.'

'And will it?' Harry asked.

'Course it will!' Hermione cried, 'My parenst are always on at me to look a little happier when I'm skiing. Now I'll have a reason to. Can I borrow Hedwig? I'll send a letter to my Mum and see what she says.'

'Yeah,' said Harry, though he didn't hold out much hope.



Hermione jumped up, checked around the hall to make sure she wasn't being watched, and gave Harry a little peck before skipping off towards the owlery.

'Doing well there, Harry,' sniggered Dean.

'Shouldn't be watching, you perv,' laughed Harry, 'not doing to badly yourself for that matter.'

Harry nodded and winked at Lavender, who was clinging onto Dean's arm. She blushed and smiled back. Harry was starting to think maybe Christmas wouldn't be so bad after all.

This had all changed by the evening. Harry thought that Hedwig must have flown at supersonic speed to reach the Grangers and get back to Hogwarts in the same day but she did manage it. Hermione was feverish when Hedwig pecked at the common room window to be let in and it was she who opened the window and unclipped the return letter from the owls foot. She opened the letter, still smiling, as Hedwig soared over to Harry, who fed her with owl treats that he'd been carrying in case she did return.

As Harry fed Hedwig he didn't notice the change in Hermione's expression. Gone was the expectant delight, replaced by a look that started off as horror and dismay before turning to anger and complete disdain.

'What is it?' Harry called over.

'That...how could they...why would they...here,' she replied before thrusting the letter into Harry's hand. As he read, he felt his face turn white.

*Dear Hermione*

*Its so good to hear from you, sweetheart, we have been so worried. Your father and I have discussed your letter but we have to say your request is absolutely out of the question. We thought that Harry was such a nice boy when he stayed here during the summer but we were apparently mistaken. We wish you to have nothing more to do with him and when we see you in a few days you are in trouble young lady.*

*You see, we had a most unexpected visitor the other day. He was a boy from your school, showed us his wand and everything. Anyway, he said he was one of your best friends and that he was only coming to us to tell us something bad about you because he was concerned for your well-being. He told us that it is common knowledge in your school that you and Harry are an item, not that this surprised us after what we saw in the summer. What he told us next, however, shocked us greatly.*

*He told us that it is also common knowledge that you are pregnant and that you and Harry are planning to elope. I don't think I need to emphasise how disappointed your father and I are about this but we will support you in whatever you do, except in keeping a relationship with Mr Potter. You are to cease all contact with him at once.*

*See you soon,*

*Lots of Love,*

*Mum and Dad xxx*

*P.s. The boy from Hogwarts didn't give his name, but he was very striking with white-blond hair. He said he will be back around to keep us informed about your activities. Thank him for coming to us wont you? You could do worse than to choose someone like him for your next boyfriend.*

Harry sat open mouthed. Hermione was pacing, ranting in total fury. It was lucky, Harry thought, that it was quite late and most people were in bed as Hermione's language was quite choice.

'I don't believe this!' Hermione yelled after a few minutes, 'How could they think that...I mean, what kind of girl do they think I...how they could think you...'

Hermione wasn't making much sense and, despite her anger, Harry had to raise a concern.

'The most important thing is how Malfoy found where your parents live,' said Harry quietly.

'What's this got to do with Malfoy?'

It dawned on Harry that Hermione was so upset about not being allowed to take Harry skiing, and that her parents thought her to be pregnant, that she hadn't taken in the whole of the letter.

'It was him,' said Harry, 'look, 'white-blond hair,' it has to be him. Who else looks like that and who would want to make people think badly of me?'

The shock registered with Hermione then.

'Malfoy!' she hissed maliciously, 'I will *kill* him!'

'No, no,' said Harry, 'I've already called shotgun on that.'

'I have to go and see mum and dad, tell them about Malfoy. What a pig he is. I'll convince them. You will come skiing with me, no matter what mum and dad say.'

'But how? There's no time.'

'I'll use the Floo Network. I'll ask Dumbledore in the morning, I'll use his fire. That's why I asked for a fireplace to be put in my house, so I could get linked up to the network. I'll go now actually, he might still be awake.'

Harry tried to protest, but it was no good. Hermione was gone in a swish of her robes and a raise of her hand to silence Harry's concerns. It was as he sat there waiting for her return that the real nature of what had happened hit him like a head butt. It didn't matter that Malfoy had spread lies about him; although it hurt, it didn't even matter much that Mr and Mrs Granger now disliked him. What was important was this one fact: Malfoy knew where the Grangers lived. And if Malfoy knew, then his father knew. This had terrible consequences.

Harry realised that if Lucius Malfoy knew where the Grangers lived then there had to be a reason for it. This reason soon entered Harry's mind: they were trying to get to *him*. They knew Hermione would be his weakness, the point where they could make him

vulnerable. But they couldn't get to her directly, at least not in school. But they could get to her parents, at any time. They were Muggles, defenceless against magic. In short, Hermione's connection with Harry had one terrible upshot; it had put her parents in mortal danger.

Apparently, Dumbledore had come to the same conclusion. Harry was beside himself with worry when Hermione emerged from the portrait hole, looking a mixture of satisfied and bemused. Harry was glad to see her, but perhaps even happier to see Dumbledore.

'Professor!' Harry yelled, 'I've just worked it out...we have to do something...they're in danger!'

'Silence, Harry,' smiled Dumbledore, 'Clearly, we have been thinking along the same lines tonight. Ever since Miss Granger burst into my office half an hour ago and told me her story I have been thinking about its implications. Clearly, you have also been thinking this. For this reason, though she didn't know it at the time, I accompanied Miss Granger to her parents house. Luckily, they were still awake, though I daresay we gave them quite a shock when we popped out of their fireplace!'

Hermione giggled.

'After Miss Granger had calmed down, and stopped yelling at her parents, I explained to them about Mr Malfoy and about your mutual enmity. I assured them, as Miss Granger did with a slightly more colourful vocabulary, that rumours of a baby between you were total fabrication. I also told them that I would trust you with my life, and as a result I'm sure one day I will have to!'

'They apologised to their daughter and it was then that I told them that I would prefer it for you to accompany them on their excursion to France. I will front the expenses, of course, but I want them to take you for the same reason I asked them to take you in over the summer.'

'You asked them to take me?' Harry asked startled.

'They never said anything!' said Hermione, again looking outraged, 'Why did you ask us to look after him?'

'It was the other way around Miss Granger,' said Dumbledore lightly.

'Huh?'

'Let me explain, I have known Harry very well since he began at Hogwarts. As I told him last year, no one could argue that we have always enjoyed a relationship that goes beyond mere teacher and pupil. Through this connection, I have known for some time that Harry has been developing strong feelings for you. I have sufficient skills as a Legilimens to know this, though I didn't need to use these to know his heart. It is written in his eyes, I was eager to begin Occlumency classes him to confirm this.

'Suspecting, as I did, that Harry considered you as more than a friend I thought it best to send him to you. The reasons for this were many and varied but two were most crucial. Firstly, I wished to encourage Harry in this relationship. You are better for Harry than you can possibly know, Miss Granger; a powerful influence on every aspect of his life, even if sometimes he doesn't fully appreciate this. His power, one that will eventually be of great use to him, streams from his feelings for you. It enabled him to stave off possession by Lord Voldemort last year.

'The second reason is that as I suspected Harry's partiality to you then it was possible that Lord Voldemort knew, or suspected, it also. After all, he was privy to Harry's emotions last year. With this in mind I thought it likely that you, or your family, could become a target to get to Harry. And now this seems more likely than ever. I sent him to you not, as I had said, for you to look after *him*, but for *him* to look after, and protect, you.'

'What?' Hermione said, looking at Harry with such a mixture of emotions that he didn't know where to start defining them.

'How could I have protected them if we were attacked?' Harry asked.

'Because, Harry,' explained Dumbledore, 'your feelings for Miss Granger mean you will never let anyone harm her. If Lord Voldemort, or anyone else, tried to hurt her that power in you, the one

of which the Dark Lord has none, would explode from you with such force that nothing could withstand it. You felt a little of it during your little spat with Mr Weasley I believe. The reason he isn't dead is because you feel too deeply for him, you are too good as friends for you to harm him mortally. Despite his strange actions you know that somewhere he is the same young man that you call your best friend.

'It is for this reason that Miss Granger's parents are only too happy to take you away with them. They feel guilty for falling victim to the dark side, Harry. I just hope they don't become even greater victims to its power.'

'But what about the law?' Harry asked, 'I don't want to get expelled, but I will if I use magic.'

'I encouraged the real Minister for Magic to insert a decree that allows you to use magic if you need to,' said Dumbledore.

'What do you mean, real Minister for Magic?' Hermione asked.

'Cornelius Fudge has not held the post for some time,' explained Dumbledore, 'He resigned after Voldemort walked into the Ministry. Instead, another man has been running the Ministry, but we have kept Fudge on as cover, It's a very covert operation.'

'Then who's the real Minister?'

'Someone you know,' smiled Dumbledore, 'Think of it like this: holidays to Norway aren't the cheapest at this time of year.'

Harry looked at Hermione and she looked back. Comprehension dawned at the same time.

'Arthur Weasley!' they chirped together.

'Enjoy your holidays!' smiled Dumbledore.

## Chapter 18: Vive le France!

Harry felt a strange mixture of emotions as he prepared to board the Hogwarts Express the next morning. It was an odd sensation that greeted the gleaming scarlet steam engine as it pulled into Hogsmeade station; usually Harry's overriding feelings would be ones of dread and despair, due to the trip away marking the end of another Hogwarts year, isolation from his friends for weeks and, perhaps worst of all, the return to the Dursleys. This time, however, was different.

This time he was going towards something that he couldn't anticipate or prepare himself for. What exactly would greet him at Kings Cross Station in a few hours time? Of course, the main cause of Harry's anxiety was the state of Mr and Mrs Grangers thinking. When he had left the Grangers in the summer they had all been on great terms; indeed, Hermione had termed her parents regard for Harry as 'love'. But now? Harry had the feeling it wouldn't be the same.

After all, there was every chance that Dumbledore's recommendation of Harry had fallen on deaf ears. That the real reason for their cave in was Hermione's fury, which Harry suspected could be quite forceful. She had a tendency to become quite passionate even if she spent most her time being reserved. Her parents did, after all, ask her to stop seeing Harry, much like Percy had advised Ron to last year. They had also thought Malfoy a more suitable suitor than he; this more than anything cut to his very heart. It was an insult akin to Hermione being called a Mudblood for sheer hurtfulness.

Ron was amiable on the return trip, something Harry found curiously suspicious. He was positively glowing in his endorsement of the holiday and was full of encouragement for Harry and Hermione as a couple.

'Don't forget now,' he said, 'France is supposed to be a very romantic country so don't get too carried away.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Harry smirked.

‘Well,’ replied Ron, ‘Don’t want Hermione getting, well...into *trouble* do we?’

Harry was a little startled by this, but even more so as Ron continued talking.

‘I mean,’ said Ron, ‘If Hermione suddenly becomes baby-laden things will be sticky for you. What with exams and stuff coming up. And we need you, Harry. Got to have our strongest Quidditch team out if we want to come back from that humiliation against Slytherin. Yes, I think its best that if you do start *eating for two*, Hermione, I’ll have to send someone round to your parents. Hey! Maybe we could get Malfoy to do it, not got much else on has he? That’d really scare you off!’

Ron was laughing, his tone demonstrating that he thought this a raucous joke. Harry laughed hollowly, encouraging Hermione to do the same. The look on her face said, though, that she was thinking along the same lines as Harry. There was something fishy about what Ron had said.

They had decided not to tell him what Dumbledore had told them in his office, or to tell him about the letter Hermione’s parents had sent to her. So, the only question was how Ron knew about this. Was it coincidence? Could Ron really have guessed that Hermione’s parents would be, or were, concerned about the possibility of her getting pregnant? And that bit about Malfoy? Harry’s head was hurting with the paranoia. He desperately wanted to discuss it with Hermione, but that didn’t seem possible. A solution presented itself from most unlikely source.

‘Hello, Ronald.’

The compartment doors had slid open and a dreamy, vague voice came wafting through the crack in the glass. It was Luna.

‘Oh, hi,’ said Ron, going an unsightly tinge of red and ruffling his hair, ‘can I help you with something?’



‘Actually, you can!’ she said delightedly, as happily as if Ron had just offered her half the gold in Gringotts, ‘I want to show you something.’

She beckoned him out with her figure and disappeared out of sight down the corridor. Ron followed her silently like a lapdog. Hermione got up, looked down the corridor and closed the door.

‘Did you tell him?’ she asked slightly angrily as she sat down.

‘No,’ retorted Harry, ‘I was hoping you did. It’d make this much less weird.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I was hoping,’ said Hermione anxiously.

‘Do you think he was just guessing?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Hermione thoughtfully, ‘could have been. But we haven’t discussed Malfoy for ages, why bring him up now? And the other thing, well, that’s a pretty vague thing to guess. Maybe he was listening to us last night. He does like to eavesdrop you know.’

‘Does he?’ Harry asked uncertainly.

‘Oh yes, how do you think everyone knew about every detail of our little kiss after the ball? Ron told Dean and Seamus, in the strictest confidence of course. That’s why it was all over the school before breakfast.’

‘Git,’ said Harry sourly, ‘nevermind. This is more important. You don’t think he could be in touch with Malfoy do you? I mean, after all that talking in his sleep he used to do. They could be connected.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Hermione, ‘Ron hates Malfoy. No, I think he was just guessing. It’s the only explanation.’

Harry wasn’t convinced. He thought there was more to this that met the eye but he couldn’t voice these concerns to Hermione, as she clearly wasn’t going to buy them. Harry thought he was becoming too suspicious for his own good. He’d be bewitching

dustbins to protect him before long. If this was the life of an Auror, constant suspicion of everyone and everything, then maybe it wasn't the life for him. That Department of Mysteries job was looking more appealing by the day.

The rest of the journey was pretty quiet. Ron never returned after Luna ushered him away so Harry and Hermione spent the rest of the journey playing exploding snap and eating a mountain of unhealthy food from the trolley (Hermione said getting sweet snacks past her parents was about as easy as trying to hide a dragon); they also played numerous games of wizard's chess, both marvelling at how bad they were at the game.

'I'm glad Ron's good at this,' said Harry wearily as he sent his rook into a stupid position, where it was promptly taken by Hermione's bishop, 'We'd have never got to the Philosophers Stone if he wasn't.'

'We've done so many great things, haven't we?' Hermione speculated happily, 'After the stone there was the Chamber of Secrets, the all that stuff with Sirius, then the Triwizard Tournament, then last year. Exciting life, really. Thank you, Harry.'

'For what?' Harry asked somewhat puzzled.

'For letting me be part of your life, it'd all be so much duller if you hadn't.'

'You're thanking me for putting your life in mortal danger for the past five years? You're mad.'

'That'd explain a lot,' said Hermione with a coy smile. Harry thought it best not to answer.

When the train finally pulled into Kings Cross Station it was already dark. Harry tried to find Ron to say goodbye but couldn't see him anywhere. He hauled his trunk through the barrier and into the Muggle world, Hermione close behind. They found her parents looking slightly unsure standing next to a trolley rack; Harry wasn't sure if they were afraid Hermione would start yelling at them or if they were as unsure of Harry's reaction as he was of theirs.

'Hi honey!' beamed Mrs Granger as she drew Hermione into a hug.

'Good to see you Harry,' smiled Mr Granger as he held out his hand for Harry, who took it graciously, 'could I have a word, Harry?'

Harry felt his body shrink into the floor; he cast a glance at Hermione who looked terrified for him. Harry allowed Mr Granger to usher him on ahead as Hermione was kept behind by her mother.

'I just wanted to apologise, Harry,' said Mr Granger solemnly.

'For what?' Harry asked, unable to disguise the relief in his voice.

'The letter we sent...I know Hermione must have shown it to you. We are mortified by what we said. We had no idea...this Malfoy character...he seemed so polite when he came to us. We were a little naïve I'm afraid. But we are parents. You'll understand when you are one.'

He seemed to think he'd said the wrong thing, looking embarrassed and awkward.

'Anyway, Harry, just wanted to say that I hope you don't think badly of us. We do only have Hermione's best interests at heart. She's our only child and we can be a little over protective at times. Its only because we care.'

Harry nodded to show he understood.

'I just hope,' continued Mr Granger, 'that this hasn't soured out relationship with you, or put a strain on your relationship with Hermione. She is quite taken with you, after all, and we're more than happy for her to keep that up. I just hope you don't despise us too much.'

'Not at all,' said Harry politely, 'I just want you to understand that I also have Hermione's best interests in mind. I'm not out to take advantage of her or anything. The stuff that's happened to our

relationship over the last year or so has come as much of a surprise to me as anyone.'

'As long as you have good intentions towards her,' grinned Mr Granger, 'then everything is fine with her mother and I. Now, Harry, have you ever been skiing before...'

Harry and Mr Granger chatted about skiing all the way to the car and by the end of it Harry was quite sure he and Hermione would soon share another thing in common; skiing wouldn't be his thing either. Hermione pulled Harry around to the front of the car as her dad loaded the trunks into the boot and her mum got in the passenger seat.

'What did he say? Did you get a lecture too?' Hermione asked looking nervous.

'No,' smirked Harry, 'just wanted to make sure I planned to make an honest woman out of you.'

'Oh, good,' smiled Hermione, the tension lifting from her shoulders, 'mum was right on at me. Told me the little *birds and bees* chat was coming up. That should be fun.'

'Can I listen?' Harry asked enthusiastically, 'I could do with a laugh!'

They drove for a little while until they reached the airport. Harry was a little surprised by this, expecting that they would have gone to Hermione's house first. She had obviously thought the same.

'Aren't we going home first?' she asked.

'No,' Mr Granger answered, 'we've already dropped our luggage off in lockers at the airport. Mr Dumbledore sent some things for Harry and they're there too. We've got a late flight so there didn't seem much point in going home.'

The flight was indeed late but when they took off at around 10:30 Harry didn't mind a bit. It was his first time on an aeroplane but he wasn't entirely comfortable; he much preferred broomstick flying

where you were, by and large, in charge of your own fate. Still, it was a new experience and a fairly interesting one. Hermione didn't seem too happy.

'Don't like flying much,' she said looking rather green, 'its not really my thing either. It's why I don't fly on broomsticks. I much prefer being on the ground.'

After about ten minutes the stewardesses came around offering drinks and selling headphone sets for the in-flight movie. Harry bought himself and Hermione a pair, though was quite put out at the price.

'£3.50 for a pair of crappy earphones? What a rip off!' he hissed as the stewardess buzzed around trying to sell more sets, 'She must be on commission.'

His mood didn't improve when the movie came on.

'MR. BEAN!' Harry cried as the movie started, 'You've got to be joking! He doesn't even speak! Do you reckon I could get a refund on the headphones?'

He stood up and looked around, trying to find the stewardess to haggle for his money back as Hermione tried to pull him back down. The stewardess, however, was nowhere to be seen.

Hermione didn't speak much for most of the journey. She looked decidedly unwell and kept a firm grip on the small paper bag in her hand. She cheered up considerably as the plane touched down, though Harry thought the turbulence on the descent would have made her puke if anything did. They took a minibus to their resort, which turned out to be less than half an hour from the airport.

The resort was pretty and idyllic, set high in the mountains and made of logs. Harry assumed it was a romantic look, due to the way Hermione grabbed onto his arm and beamed at him and the surroundings. It did have a picture postcard look to it, not that Harry looked at it much. He was too captivated by Hermione who looked really cute with pink, flushed cheeks and snow in her hair, the cold making her eyes bright and shiny.

Once inside their cabins, Harry and Hermione had separate ones, Harry opened the small trunk that Dumbledore had sent to the Grangers. It was packed full of skiing clothes, including a huge red outfit that looked like a boiler suit. Harry thought he'd look stupid in it, and promptly found he was right when he put it on. He looked puffy and out of proportion but, by looking out of his window, he could see other people wearing similar things so knew he wouldn't be alone in looking silly.

'Aww, Harry! You look cute!' Hermione squealed as she opened the door. Her outfit wasn't so bad; it was blue and slightly better fitting, offset by furry white boots. 'Just came in to say goodnight,' she continued, 'I just wanted to see you in your skiing gear.'

'Why d'you put yours on for?' Harry asked, glowing with shame at his reflection.

'Wanted to make sure it still fits,' she said brightly, 'It's been a while since I wore it.'

'You haven't grown that much in a year, have you?'

'In some places,' she said absently, 'Night, Harry.'

And he hopped out leaving Harry feeling very glad that Ron couldn't see him dressed like this.

The next day, Harry discovered that he could comfortably add skiing to golf, divination and knitting as things he was totally useless at. He fell down so many times that by the end of the day he wasn't sure who was more wet; him, for falling down, or Hermione from crying through so much laughter. Still, it did have one advantage as every time he fell down Hermione would rub the part of his leg he hurt the most, which was doing more for him than he let on.

By the end of the evening he was in some pain. Dinner was lovely, if a little small, and the resort had some nice paths next to the pistes that Hermione dragged Harry along. They walked silently for a little until, without warning, Hermione took Harry's hand. She said nothing, just looked at the stars and blushed in the moonlight. It was

still a little awkward and unnatural doing these things, but they made the blood pump in Harry's veins all the same. He decided to be brave.

He unlatched his hand from Hermione's, again they said nothing, but he removed his glove and put it in his pocket. He took Hermione's hand and pulled her glove off as well. She looked a little confused, still not looking at him, but her eyes popped wide as Harry held her hand again. The touch of her skin was electric and when she squeezed his hand it sent a rush of emotion through him so powerful that he felt giddy.

The small light cast a hazy hue across the snow, lit up and shining in the moonlight. Still, they walked in silence, the smile on Hermione's face and the snow melting in her hair more than making up for her lack of words. It was she who made the next move; slipping her hand out of Harry's, she brushed her hair behind her ears, Harry swore he saw her take a steadying breath, then she arced in to stand closer to him, curling her arm around him as she did. Harry could see her biting her lip, unsure of how he would respond. He swung his arm around her shoulders and she smiled as she placed her head onto Harry's shoulder, the silence ringing dull in his ears and his heartbeat now in his throat.

Harry was trembling so much, though he wasn't remotely cold. This was new territory for him; he had faced Voldemort, won Quidditch matches, dealt with the whole school disliking him on numerous occasions but never anything like this. They were outside school, rules were relaxed and options available. But what in the name of Merlin was he supposed to do?

Whether she knew what she was doing or not, it was Hermione who kept making the next moves. The one that signalled the end of their walk was one that Harry knew he'd remember all his life. They had reached the end of the walkway they had been treading; the snow was getting heavier and the clocks ticking on. There was a small alcove cut into the wall of the cabin complex and as they passed it Hermione, quite to Harry's shock, pulled them both into it.

‘Don’t speak, Harry,’ she said huskily as he made to ask what she was up to.

He didn’t have much chance to speak after that. Hermione’s arms were soon around his neck and she drew him in. Harry felt her forcefulness was a violation, but his fears, concerns and all else in the world faded away as she embraced him. Her kisses were warm and tender and lasted so long that Harry thought he should come up for air, not that he needed to breathe anymore. He was lost, somewhere between joy and euphoria, a place where all that mattered was that he kept kissing Hermione, for terrible things would happen if he stopped.

How long they stayed in the alcove Harry didn’t know, but after a long while Hermione drew her lips from his, hugging him gently for an equal length of time. Distant footsteps echoing from the wooden path caused them both to jump out of the alcove and straighten up. They walked back along the path, their hands slipping naturally into each other’s this time, and they walked until they reached their rooms. Harry felt a pang of pain as Hermione turned away from him.

‘See you in the morning,’ she said sweetly as she opened her door.

‘I won’t sleep tonight, you know,’ said Harry.

‘Me neither,’ smiled Hermione, ‘same time tomorrow?’

Harry could only nod spastically as Hermione giggled and closed the door, blushing madly. This, he thought, is going to be the best Christmas ever.



## Chapter 19: The Village Warning

Harry's night was restless; after he eventually managed to get to sleep his dreams were bizarre and subversive, even by his standards. He didn't think he'd get to sleep at all, considering that all he could think about was the events of his walk and the promise of more of the same the following night. He kept going through everything in his mind, assuring himself that he would try to think of less inane things tomorrow when, hopefully, Hermione would indulge Harry in his fast developing obsession with her lips.

His dreams on the other hand were a little disturbing. Ron and Luna had decided to play a trick on Harry by letting Ginny ride his Firebolt. Harry was trying to run after her but couldn't get any purchase from his legs. Eventually, she came down before she and Ron starting playing pig-in-the-middle with the Firebolt. Then Voldemort appeared wearing a kilt and a pirate hat and stole his Firebolt, running with it into the Forbidden Forest and burning it.

Harry woke with a start. It was late, all was quiet at the mountain resort and Harry was sure that everyone must be asleep. He strolled to his window, looking out onto the snow kissed ground and watching the night amble along in peace. The snow was undisturbed, at least most of it was. There was a thick impression that slithered through the otherwise flat snow, in between the log path that surrounded the cabins and the trees a few metres away.

Harry found himself transfixed by the perfect, unbroken line that snaked through the crisp snow. Whatever had caused it hadn't left any other marks, there were no footprints and no other signs of disturbance anywhere. It was as if something had glided across on its belly, silently and stealthily. The silence was pierced by something that made Harry's blood turn oddly cold.

*'They are here. But I don't know where. I could find them...I could kill them...I am hungry Master...let me kill...'*

Harry flew closer to the window, swinging his head up and down to find the source of the voice. It was a low, hissy voice, most unlike a normal person's. The way left and right from Harry's window was empty, but the remnants of the voice were still audible, just too quiet

for Harry to hear anymore. He dashed to his wardrobe, threw on a jacket and rushed to the door, grabbing his wand as he did.

He was barely out of his door when he smashed into something. It was hard and hairy, but had quite a nice scent.

'Harry! What are you doing?'

It was Hermione.

'Sorry,' said Harry as he rose gingerly to his feet, 'I heard a noise outside. I was going to see what it was.'

'You heard it too?' Hermione said shakily, 'Like a hissing?'

'No, I heard someone talking in a hissy voice. Didn't you hear it?' Harry asked as a bad possibility formed in his mind.

'I didn't hear anyone talking,' said Hermione.

The possibility became even stronger in his mind; a long, slithery line in the snow, a hissing that Harry thought was a language. It was too much of a coincidence.

'There's a snake out there,' said Harry seriously, 'It might have been sent by Voldemort. I know he has one. I heard it talking. Its wants to kill...us probably now I think of it. I'm going to go and have a look.'

'I'm coming to,' said Hermione quickly.

'No,' stabbed Harry, his voice shaky with nerves, though not for himself, 'you stay here. Its too dangerous. You have to stay here in case it comes-'

'Harry don't even bother! If you're going anywhere that might be dangerous then you'll have to hex me to stop me going too. And we both have had enough of your Defence Against The Dark Arts classes to know that you cant do that!'

'I could if I wanted to,' grinned Harry, though he doubted the sincerity of this claim.

It was obvious that Hermione would brook no opposition so Harry had little choice but to allow her to accompany him to search for the snake, though he didn't want to. Their wands drawn, they edged through the silent corridor and made towards the main doors. The silence droned and Harry was so tuned to hear any little deviation in sound that his head was hurting through the concentration.

They reached the door and stepped quietly through it, Harry looking immediately both ways as if trying to cross a busy road. There was nothing, just the whistle of a light breeze tickling around the resort. Harry followed the slithery line, it led all the way along the side of the cabin complex and down into the trees that ran up to the ski slope. Harry made to follow.

'Harry! What do you think to you're doing?' Hermione squeaked, she sounded very afraid.

'I'm following the trail,' replied Harry casually as if this was the most natural situation in the world.

'No you're not,' said Hermione sharply, 'it leads right into the trees. Who knows what could be in there. Its dark and its late and there is no way I'm letting you go in there. If you try, I *will* hex you for your own good. Don't push me, Harry.'

Harry could tell she wasn't joking. Her eyes were steely and determined, and at the same time wide and frightened. Harry had such an urge to race into the trees to find whatever was lurking there, but he resisted. He lit his wand tip and aimed the narrow beam into the gloom of dark green and black, hoping to catch sight of something. But all he saw was snow, glinting and falling as the trees ruffled in the breeze.

Hermione grabbed Harry's arm and they began to walk back towards the cabin door. She seemed convinced he was going to sprint away from her and into the wood; she looked fearful that his saving-people-complex was too insatiable to be overcome. Although

they'd seen nothing, Harry couldn't shake the sensation of being watched, as though unseen eyes were fixed on him, watching him move away.

Harry and Hermione reached their rooms and prepared to say goodnight. Harry, still buzzing with fear and paranoia, turned to his room and gripped his handle. Hermione gripped his arm.

'Where do you think you're going?' Hermione asked bossily.

'Um...to bed?' Harry answered, though feeling it might not be the right response.

'Oh no you don't,' continued Hermione, 'you don't think I'm going in there on my own do you? Not when something's lurking outside.'

'I thought you said it was nothing?'

'I didn't say that! Honestly, Harry you don't half make things up! You said it was a voice and I believe you. If it was a snake then I wouldn't have heard it anyway. I don't speak Parseltongue. But anyway, I'm not sleeping on my own. Will you come in with me?'

'What'll your parents say?' Harry asked nervously.

'They won't mind,' said Hermione brightly, 'I'll just tell them to budge up and make room for you!'

Harry gave her a not-amused stare.

'C'mon, Harry. My parents don't come in to check on me. Besides, you're only in here protecting me. You won't hurt me...will you Harry?'

Her voice had taken on the same huskiness it had earlier when she had told him not to speak. Saying it again, now, made Harry's insides make like a washing machine and spin around as if going through all the wash programmes. He felt his throat expand to several times its usual size and he was going spasmodic again.

There was one curious question, though: why had he gotten up in the first place?

He couldn't remember but he didn't care as Hermione led him into her cabin and locked the door behind them. She whipped off her dressing gown and slid into bed, Harry tried fruitlessly not to look at her nightdress as she did so. It was white and satiny, Harry thought it a little too strappy considering how cold it was. He took off his own nightgown and flung in onto Hermione's, marvelling at how underdressed he felt in his plain blue pyjamas.

'Are you going to stand there all night?' Hermione asked gently. Harry couldn't answer, just walked awkwardly over to the bed and sat down on the edge. Hermione pushed him off and lifted the covers, 'In...now!' she demanded. Harry obliged.

Hermione immediately snuggled up to him, her heartbeat reverberating through Harry's chest and magnifying his own, which he realised was going too fast to be comfortable with. Hermione laid her head onto Harry's chest, her hand next to it on his shoulder. Harry lay flat on his back, as rigid as if someone had put the body bind curse on him. He needed to pee badly, but Harry knew he dared not move; he didn't want to poke Hermione's eye out after all.

Harry awoke the next morning to the sounds of birds twittering outside the window as light poured into the little room. He was trying to remember why he had had trouble sleeping the previous night, then he saw why. He jumped slightly when he realised he had actually slept in the same bed as Hermione and that it wasn't just a dream. He breathed a sigh of relief that the snake hadn't come back and killed them in the night, something he had gone to sleep thinking was a real possibility.

But Harry soon realised he had other problems. He noticed that somehow he and Hermione had fallen into a spooning position. This was fine, apart from the totally numbness of his arm under Hermione's head. He looked at his other arm and when he saw it wrapped around Hermione, and which part of her it had come to rest on, Harry felt those all too familiar stirrings all over again. This wasn't a good thing.

It became worse as Hermione shifted a little and Harry realised just how close she was to him. Her legs were intertwined with his, meaning the rest of her body was pressed right up against him. This was also a bad thing and Harry wished she would stop grinding into him; he wasn't entirely convinced she was doing it accidentally.

'Stay asleep!' Harry begged in his mind, 'Please, stay asleep!'

Hermione, on the other hand, was giving no signs that she was actually asleep. Harry could see a little grin on her face, even though she looked like she was trying to conceal it. He was trying to shift his body away from her, it would be less embarrassing that way, but every time he inched back she moved with him. Not allowing him to escape. After a while, she gave up the ghost.

'Harry,' she said sleepily with a fake yawn, 'you didn't bring your wand to bed did you?'

It was the chance Harry needed.

'Yeah, sorry...bit paranoid...I'll just move it.'

And he did, jumping up and pretending to fiddle around with his wand. He swore Hermione's sleepy expression went slightly disappointed but he made his excuses, to which she didn't argue, and raced across into his room. And just in time to, for no sooner had he opened his door then he heard the one belonging to Hermione's parents creak open.

Harry edged inside his door, closing it as much as he could so that it looked fully shut. He could hear Mr and Mrs Granger talking.

'Shall we check on her, just to be sure?' Mr Granger asked.

'We shouldn't really, invading her privacy. But we cant exactly check on Harry,' answered Mrs Granger.

'Well, Harry's door seems shut. Just poke your head in, to say good morning.'

Harry heard Hermione's door open, followed by two embarrassed squeals.

'Hermione! What are you doing?'

'Mum! Do you mind? Never heard of knocking? I'm trying to change here!'

'Really?' Mrs Granger didn't seem convinced, Harry could only speculate why, but soon the door closed and the Grangers voices died away down the corridor.

Harry left it a little while before going into breakfast, he had to cool off anyway. When he did finally enter the breakfast hall he found Hermione and her mother shooting daggers at each other. Mr Granger, however, seemed quite jovial.

'Morning, Harry,' he beamed, 'Slept well I hope.'

'Yeah, great,' said Harry.

'Looking forward to a few more bruises out on the slopes today?' Mr Granger chuckled.

'Cant wait,' replied Harry with admirable false enthusiasm.

Harry and Hermione didn't ski for very long. Harry told his instructor to bugger off after he tried to give him pointers. The instructor had decided teaching Harry to ski was an impossible job so he began advising him on how to fall over in a way that would minimise the hurt. Harry wanted to curse him but Hermione dragged him away.

Instead, they found a rather secluded spot in the mountains and had a snowball fight, Harry careful not to hit Hermione too hard. The snow had begun to fall and Hermione looked positively adorable as the snow settled in her hair as she tried to blow it off her face.

'Hermione,' called Harry, 'come here. I want to tell you something.'

'What?' Hermione asked as she trudged over slowly.

'This,' said Harry as he put his hands around Hermione's head and gave her a little kiss.

'What was that for?' Hermione asked, blushing furiously.

'Just felt like it. You look so lovely. Do you mind?'

'What do you think?' she asked. Harry didn't have much time to respond, though, as Hermione flung herself at him and they spent ages rolling around in the snow.

After dinner, Hermione suggested they make their way down to the local village. She had looked up the place at Hogwarts and found the village had some places of historical magical interest. So, they trooped down the path and into the little hamlet trying to find anything that looked remotely non-Muggle.

It didn't seem good. Mostly, the village was made up of tiny cottages and small shops selling hand-crafted gifts and food. They were about to give up when Harry heard a passing voice comment on a pub bristling with life.

'I've been coming here for a ten years,' said a regal looking gentleman to his companion, 'and I've never once seen that place open.'

'Some say its haunted, sounds come from it at times...'

They disappeared into the misty snow and Harry looked at the pub. A rusty sign creaked in the wind above the doorway. It read '*The Owls Nest*'. Harry shrugged at Hermione and opened the door. She followed him inside; several people looked up, most looking shocked that two teenagers had walked in, but most paid no attention. They sidled up to bar and the barman looked suspiciously at them.

'Are you weezirds?' he asked.

'Yes, are we allowed in here?' Harry asked.



'If you are weezirds, zen yes. Zis an a bar for weezirds only.'

'Do you sell Butterbeer?' Harry asked.

'Of course' smiled the barman, 'Two butterbiers. Zat will be-'

Harry hoped this wouldn't happen, not here, in France. But it was about to, he knew it. The wind must have blown his fringe away from his forehead and his scar was visible. The barman was staring at it as though it were the answer to the riddle of the meaning of life.

'Can yoo be? Are yoo? Is zit possible? 'Arry Pottair?'

The bar went silent. People were shifting everywhere to look at him and Harry felt the colour rise in his cheeks.

'Yes, I'm him. I mean...that's me,' said Harry resignedly.

Soon, it was like the Leaky Cauldron all over again. People were coming up and shaking his hands and then shaking Hermione's too. All offered to buy their drinks, but the barman wouldn't answer them.

'I will not 'ere of it,' he said, 'ze drinks are free to Arry Pottair and 'is girlfriend at any time!'

So Harry and Hermione had a cheap night. They drank flagons of steaming Butterbeer and felt so warm and cosy that Harry didn't want to leave. He liked the Muggle world, but being amongst his own people was the only way to be. Only one person hadn't congratulated Harry on being Harry. This man was sat in a dim corner, a hood drawn across his face but the outline of a silver beard under his cloak. He got up unexpectedly and walked towards Harry, as if this thought about him had triggered a response.

He swept silently to Harry and Hermione's table, sliding in opposite them. He didn't speak for several minutes, instead choosing to slurp away at a tankard of ale in his hand.

'So, you are Harry Potter,' said it the voice. It was hollow and largely lifeless. It didn't endear Harry to its owner.

'Yeah, that's right,' said Harry slipping his hand subtly into his robes and grabbing his wand.

'There is no need to take arms against me, Mr Potter, I mean not to harm you.'

'Then who are you? What do you want?' Hermione said, sounding unnecessarily rude.

'I just mean to say that you are being very foolish,' said the voice, it reminded Harry of someone but he couldn't remember who.

'What's that mean?' Harry asked.

'Just this. In this day and age do you really think it wise to draw attention to yourself? Especially here, so far away from those who protect you. After all, you have a tendency to be overheard in places unfamiliar.'

Then Harry remembered. The voice, he recognised it. Maybe it was the link with being overheard before, Harry couldn't help but think of the supposed-to-be secret meeting to start the DA last year.

'You! I know you!' Harry blurted, 'You run the Hogs Head in Hogsmeade village.'

'I am uncovered I see,' said the voice, in a strange calming tone not so unlike Albus Dumbledore's, but not quite as deep.

'Are you holidaying here too?' Hermione asked.

'Yes, I thought I needed a holiday. I knew this place had a nice quiet pub for magic people. It seemed a perfect choice.'

'Why should we try to be quieter?' Harry said, 'You said people could be listening.'

'And indeed they could,' said the hooded face darkly, 'You never know when Voldemort could be around.'

Harry was shocked when he heard the name. Very few people used the name, and most belonged to the original Order of the Phoenix, most of whom were now dead. The stranger stood up.

'I just felt you had to be warned,' he said, 'not to draw attention to yourself. There are rumours of dangerous things abroad. Be watchful, Harry Potter.'

And he swept away and out of the doors. Harry and Hermione were too spooked to stay much longer, anxiety replacing the happiness Harry had felt most of the evening. They ambled back up the path towards their cabins, Harry convinced they were being followed all the way.

When they reached the cabin they found most people going to bed. He wasn't tired and neither was Hermione so they sat down on the floor in front of the log fire. Harry leant against a chair nearby and was delightedly shocked when Hermione snuggled up to him. They stayed like that for ages, watching the fire crackling merrily in the grate as the embers flew out and drifted around in front of them.

'Hope you've got me something nice for Christmas, Harry,' said Hermione warningly.

'You'll find out in the morning, wont you,' replied Harry evasively, 'I think you'll like it. I hope you do anyway cos the place I got it from doesn't take refunds.'

'I'm really glad you came, Harry,' purred Hermione as she squeezed him around the middle, 'I'd have been so lonely if you hadn't.'

'I'm glad I came too,' said Harry smoothing Hermione's hair.

'Harry...' said Hermione tentatively, 'I just wanna say...dont think I'm weird or anything...I know it's a bit much, but...I think I l-'

'I know,' said Harry quickly, 'me too.'

He could see Hermione's eyes shining brightly in the firelight, the reflection of the flames flickering against her cheeks. They sat

only for a short while longer before Hermione declared her intention to go to bed.

'I think we should have separate rooms though, it was too close this morning,' said Harry.

'You heard that!' Hermione said looking mortified, 'Yeah, our own rooms would be best, After all, you want Santa to bring you something nice.'

'He already did,' said Harry, looking defiantly at Hermione as if daring her to blush or look away. She did neither, instead kissing him so hard he was pushed back against the wall.

'Sweet dreams, Harry,' she said going into her room.

Harry didn't want sweet dreams; they couldn't be any better than his reality. He smiled and went to bed, determined for once to sleep well.

## Chapter 20: Casualties of War

Christmas morning dawned bright and chilly on the sleepy French ski resort. Harry was woken by Hermione who bounded onto his bed like an over excited puppy, clutching a set of packages that Harry recognised immediately. They were unmistakably the gift he'd brought her for Christmas and she looked, Harry was happy to say, delighted with them.

'Oh *Harry!* This is just *wonderful!*' she crowed as she bounced up and down beside him. Harry had bought Hermione a set of books on the procedures and structures that needed to be put in place to start up proper social societies and organisations. Harry had found this specialised set, called *Unslaving the Enslaved: A Guide to Inter-species Harmony*, and thought Hermione would like it, if she ever decided to set up S.P.E.W outside Hogwarts. It came with advice on leaflet campaigns, public promotions, rallies and events and other ways to raise awareness of cruelty. It also came complete with a practical kit to aid the creations of leaflets, badges, handbooks and many other things besides.

'Harry, this is truly incredible!' Hermione beamed, 'Its perfect! Thank you so, so much!'

A little peck from Hermione made Harry's day; he considered not getting up at all, not wanting to spoil the mood. He found that this was impossible, however, as Hermione began nattering excitedly about all the things she was going to do with her present, all the ways she would be able to help the house-elves. Harry let her babble on, eyeing the small pile of packages that had lodged themselves at the foot of his bed and had somehow miraculously escaped falling off when Hermione bounced on the mattress.

He reached down and took the first package as Hermione read aloud from her book. Harry unwrapped it and found a chocolate fudge Christmas Cake from Hagrid; the next package was his usual jumper from Mrs Weasley, who had knitted a scene of two wizards duelling on the front; Mrs Weasley had also sent a tin of her fabulous homemade fudge along with Ron's present, a book called *The Quidditch Encyclopaedia* with was packed full of Quidditch trivia and

including moving video-like images of great matches and spectacular highlights.

Harry also unwrapped a set of teaching aids to Defence Against The Dark Arts, sent by Remus Lupin; a very old manual describing the best ways to produce lesson plans for teaching this subject, which included a set of very old defensive and offensive spells, which Harry had never heard of but was desperate to try, sent by Dumbledore; a lovely velvet cloak was enclosed with a small handbook called *Metamorphmagi for Beginners*, and a note which read, 'Wotcher, Harry! Thought you might like this, it was knocking spare around the office. Trainee Aurors use it to change their form and disguise themselves. Have fun with it. Tonks xxx.'

Hermione's present was last. As he reached it, Harry noticed her reading tailed off and the corners of her eyes twitched towards the parcel as Harry unwrapped it. There were two packages, one was a book that Harry was transfixed by immediately. *Duelling Without Incantation: Silence Can Be Deadly*, was its title and as Harry flicked through the pages he saw exercises designed to allow the wizard to go beyond spells; in effect, to duel in the way Dumbledore had fought Voldemort in the Department of Mysteries.

'I thought you might need that,' said Hermione absently, placing her book aside, 'Dumbledore said you will be duelling with him next term. He wants you to go beyond the basic hexes and jinxes to more advanced duelling. I was against the idea myself but I know he's right. If you go into a duel with...V-Voldemort...you'll need more than Petrificus Totalus and a Jelly Legs Curse.'

Harry laughed at the thought of fighting Voldemort with such silly spells, trying hard to focus on a mental image of him dancing like he was doing the Riverdance while being attacked by flying bogies. If only there was a Boggart around...it'd have no chance against that image.

Harry still held another box in his hand. He noticed that Hermione's hands were fidgeting in her lap; this was obviously her personal present. Harry opened it slowly, savouring the pressure as Hermione was kept on the edge. He found a handsome red leather

box inside the wrapping paper and he creaked it open. Inside sat a thin silver band that looked like a bracelet of sorts. It had a jewel sunk into the centre of it and inside a milky mist was swirling around, much like in a Foe-Glass.

‘What s it?’ Harry asked breathlessly, mesmerised by the swirling in the jewel.

‘It’s a mood amulet,’ said Hermione nervously, ‘if you put it on we’re linked. They come in pairs; I’ve got one too, see? Once you put it on, I’ll feel it when you feel strong emotion; when you’re really happy, or really frightened. Stuff like that. It’ll let me find you wherever you are. I thought you might like it.’

‘I love it!’ cried Harry as he slipped the band around his wrist. The band itself was thin and where it went around his wrist it arced up on the back of his hand and came to a point just below his knuckles. Harry thought it looked cool.

Immediately after slipping it on, though, he felt a surge of emotion that was most certainly unconnected to what he was feeling. On the one side he could still feel the happiness and joy he felt on opening his presents, but he could also feel a strong sense of anxiety. This, Harry surmised, must be Hermione’s wait for approval on her gift. Harry decided to put her mind at ease...

When they finally got up properly, about an hour later, the residents of the resort were all in the dining area tucking into breakfast. Harry and Hermione joined the queue to the buffet-style self-service area and helped themselves to the food of their choice. Harry made sure he put food on his plate in premium quantities, not wanting to incur the disapproving stares he’d got from the Grangers during their first breakfast, when Harry had piled tons of eggs, bacon and toast with lascivious amounts of butter and marmalade on his plate. He didn’t want to appear too piggish, unhealthy and uncaring about his teeth.

‘Merry Christmas!’ Mr and Mrs Granger chirped as Harry and Hermione sat down.

‘Merry Christmas,’ replied Harry eyeing his breakfast hungrily and hoping Hermione’s parents wouldn’t keep him from eating.

‘Thank you for those presents, Harry,’ said Mr Granger jovially.

‘What?’ Hermione said looking surprised, ‘I didn’t know you had got mum and dad anything.’

‘It wasn’t much,’ said Harry, ‘Just a couple of boxes of Toothflossing Stringmints, a model Quidditch kit for your dad to make and learn about the sport-’

‘And this!’ Mrs Granger said excitedly, thrusting her wrist at Hermione, ‘Isn’t it lovely. It’s a watch that doesn’t just tell the time but its got a hand that will let me know where you are and what you’re doing. *And*, if I need to get in touch with you I just push the button on the side and the alarm on your watch will go off. Lets try it.’

After a few more minutes of Hermione’s parents enjoying the magic watch, she turned to Harry and said, grinning, ‘Wonder where you got the idea for the watch from? Not thinking about The Burrow, eh?’

Harry shrugged back and tucked into his breakfast, which he was sure had started to call out silently to his stomach and it had rumbled in response. Harry decided after his first helping that it just wasn’t enough so he helped himself to more and was happy to see Hermione’s parents too engrossed by the watch to have noticed his greed.

After breakfast Harry and Hermione strolled down to the village with the intention of seeing if it was any friendlier by daylight. Hermione had put a little holly clip in her hair that Harry found quite cute and he spent most of the time looking unblinkingly at her as she talked merrily about things Harry thought totally irrelevant. After all, who cares about SPEW, Voldemort, school and all that rubbish when you were walking in the snow with a pretty girl?

The walk seemed shorter in the day than it had at night but Harry suspected it was because they knew the way this time. The village seemed quite boring so Harry thought; quaint little shops selling



quaint little pieces of rubbish. Harry thought it was the perfect place to buy token presents for people you didn't want to spend much time thinking about.

Apart from the shops the only points of interest were a wishing well, which Hermione suggested was about as likely to bring good luck as Professor Trelawney was of correctly predicting Harry's death; there was also a strange looking-glass inside one building that showed a perfect version of the face of anyone who looked into it. Harry thought it was like a perverted version of Dumbledore's Mirror of Erised.

The village grew tiresome well before lunch so Harry and Hermione spent most of the time in front of the large fire in the resort. Hermione was already half way through *Unslaving the Enslaved* and Harry was half way through the cake Hagrid had sent him, which wasn't bad considering Hagrid's usual appalling cooking standards. By the time lunch was served Harry was starving again. Not caring about how much of a pig he looked, he stacked his plate full of every item of food he could find and drowned the whole lot in rich gravy.

During the meal Mr and Mrs Granger indulged in several bottles of wine and began telling stories about Hermione's youth. It didn't take long for Hermione to start blushing, which Harry noticed she hadn't done for a long time. It was only after her parents started telling stories that involved a naked Hermione getting lost at the beach, and at the funfair, and in the street that she dragged Harry away from the dining room.

'Those two,' she said flustered, '*honestly!* Could they be any more embarrassing. Harry, *watch out!*'

They had reached Harry's room just as a small rock smashed through the window. Harry threw himself in front of Hermione as shards of glass cascaded across the room. Harry thought it lucky he hadn't been cut. This thought paled into insignificance quickly as Harry remembered why he had been given special privileges for this trip. He whipped out his wand, crossed the room in a single bound and peered carelessly out of the window.

'HARRY!' Hermione yelled, 'Get back! Make yourself an easy target why don't you? That's your stealth Auror training failed!'

Harry realised she was right and stepped back, thinking that it was pointless to do so now. He eyed the blackness falling outside the window but couldn't make out any figures of any sort. He even chanced a look at the floor but couldn't see any snake tracks either. The likely source of the thrower would have been the woods but the rustling trees were providing perfect cover.

'Harry, look at this.'

Hermione had picked up the rock that had smashed the window. She handed it to Harry, then repaired the window with a quick spell. The breeze in the room died away as the shards of glass shot back into the window frame and Harry unfurled a piece of card from the rock. It looked like a crudely cut Christmas card and the image on the front brought a lump to Harry's throat. It showed a shaggy black dog, draped in a thin, ragged cloak, being strangled by a serpent. Harry opened the card and saw a message written inside.

*'My pieces are set, the BLACK knight has fallen, the checkmate is coming...Dumbledore's Pawn'*

'What does that mean?' Hermione asked, casting nervous glances back towards the window.

'Obvious isn't it?' Harry said gloomily, 'The Black knight, that means Sirius. Pieces are set – the plan is ready. One more move and I'm dead.'

'Don't be so pessimistic, Harry!' Hermione cried, trying to sound encouraging though her voice didn't truly mean it.

'Why not?' Harry yelled, 'It's clear to me. I'm here, all alone. Voldemort knows I'm here cos his snake is watching me, and now he wants to let me know he's got me where he wants me. He wants to see me in fear, paranoid, stuff like that. He knows I'm not really his equal; this is just a game to him. Give me one reason not to be pessimistic.'

'Well,' said Hermione slowly, 'We played a game of chess once before where the black knight was the first piece taken. We won that game and you defeated Voldemort that time.'

‘Well,’ said Harry, calming in his amazement at Hermione’s ability to remember exact details of things that happened ages ago, ‘lets hope history repeats itself. I’m going to send this to Dumbledore, just to see if he recognises Voldemort’s handwriting. It could be another trick; maybe Malfoy knows we’re here.’

At that moment a burst of flame illuminated the small cabin room. Fawkes, Dumbledore’s phoenix, shot from the fire and landed on Harry’s shoulder. Harry tentatively held out the card for him and he took it in his beak and flew into the air again. A burst of flame later and he was gone.

‘I don’t think you’re alone here, Harry,’ smiled Hermione.

Harry was about to react when a disturbance outside broke the mood. It sounded like people fighting; angry voices, sounds of a scuffle, pained yells, small explosion-like noises...then all quiet. This time, Harry didn’t even bother going to the window. He raced, instead, to the door, yanked it open and took off into the hall. He sprinted past an old couple in the corridor, trying not to laugh as the old woman said to her husband, ‘Oh look, dear! That boy and his girlfriend are pretending to be wizards! Look, they’ve even made little magic wands! Aww!’

Harry kicked open the door to the complex and hurtled around the side of the building towards the place where the noises had come from. The place was deserted, Harry even checked the trees before Hermione dragged him away from them. There was, ominously enough, a splattering of blood on the snow outside Harry’s window.

‘This cant be good,’ he said resignedly to Hermione as they crouched over the spots of blood.

Harry insisted on checking the entire complex, Hermione managing to convince Harry to stick to the parts with lights. They found nothing but just as they were giving up hope they heard loud voices again, more of them this time. They were coming from the entrance to the complex, which was, unfortunately for Harry, on the other side of the building. Frustratingly, by the time Harry had dragged Hermione around to the entrance the voices had gone. There were, however,

scorch marks on the porch and more, heavier, spots of blood in the snow. Harry heard footsteps behind him and swung around.

'You missed it I'm afraid,' said Mr Granger.

'What? Missed what?' Hermione demanded impatiently.

'The fireworks,' answered Mr Granger calmly.

'What fireworks?' Harry asked, almost dreading the answer.

'Well, five or six men were out here just moments ago. Not quite sure how they disappeared so fast actually. Anyway, they were all shooting stars and sparks from fireworks. It was quite spectacular, though I think its highly irresponsible to hold fireworks.'

'They were shooting them from their hands?' said Hermione desperately.

'Yes. Anyway, your mother and I are going to walk down into the village for a-'

'NO!' yelled Harry and Hermione together.

'Why not?' Mr Granger asked with an infuriating smirk.

'They weren't fireworks, Mr Granger,' said Harry, losing all pretence, 'We think they were wizards. Bad ones. They were attacking someone. See the blood?'

'Dad,' begged Hermione, 'Stay in tonight, *please*.'

'Why on earth-'

'Because,' said Harry loudly, 'the bad wizards could be after me. It sounded like they were fighting someone else. I'm going to find them, the blood trail leads through there. Hermione can stay here with you.'

'No she bloody well cant!' cried Hermione, her father looked shocked at her language, 'There is no way you're going in there alone. I'm coming.'

'I *will* curse you, I swear to god,' said Harry softly but steely, turning his wand on Hermione, 'you stay here. I'm going in there. This is my fight. I'm not putting you in danger.'

'But-'

'No arguments,' said Harry, his wand in Hermione's face, 'Stay!'

It was Mr Granger's firm hand on Hermione's shoulder that gave Harry his chance and he sprinted away. The snow was crisp and soft underfoot, crackling smoothly with each step Harry took. It was quite a while before Harry could no longer hear Hermione's yells, but die away they did. Harry suddenly felt very alone and very vulnerable.

The path was quite dense with trees overhead and the gloom was unnerving. Harry, unable to shake the strong sensation of being watched, was toying with the idea of lighting his wand. On the one hand, he could see hardly anything due to the trees, but on the other if he lit his wand then the unseen faces would know where he was. As he walked on he made a decision; the trees had become so thick that Harry could barely make out his own hand in front of his face. So, despite a wide clearing that was slightly brighter than the path, Harry muttered '*lumos*' and lit his wand. It was a mistake.

Almost as soon as the beam of light hit the snow then several shouts, maybe four or five, of '*Stupefy!*' rang around the little clearing. Harry flung himself to the ground and was amazed to see five red jets of light spin off trees in the dark and vanish. Several branches and clumps of leaves fell from the trees as more spells rang out. Harry had to take a chance.

He watched one jet of light erupt from one patch of darkness. He aimed his wand towards it and had an idea. He abandoned his idea of a stunning spell, deciding instead to try and cause pain.

'*Diffindo!*' Harry yelled. To his astonishment, a scream pierced the night and Harry knew he'd hit his target. A large, cumbersome figure stumbled through brambles on the floor and into the clearing. Harry saw him illuminated by the red sparks flying past him. '*Petrificus Totalus! Stupefy!*' Harry yelled with two fast flicks of his wand towards his target. The man, who Harry saw had a deep red gash across the

width of his face, was hit by Harry's spells; his arms snapped to his sides and as he was falling Harry's second spell caught him and was of such force that it sent him spinning away and Harry heard a dull thud as he hit a tree.

Harry heard several pops nearby and knew for certain that more people had Disapparated nearby. He stumbled up, trying to get out of the clearing just as a jet of light flew in Harry's direction. He turned away from it but it still caught him in the shoulder and sent him sailing ungainly through the air. Harry recognised the spell as a Blasting Curse but it didn't make the pain any less. Harry thought it lucky it had caught his left side because if his right arm had been shaking with pain as much as his left now was then he'd be done for in this battle.

As it was, Harry managed to get to his feet and shoot several hopeful spells into the darkness. However, Harry knew that flight and not fight was the order of the day. From what he could tell, due to the number of places the spells were aimed at him from, Harry guessed that he was outnumbered six to one. The problem was that the exit to the clearing was being guarded and it seemed the Death Eaters were determined to keep him there. On the plus side, Harry could make out the guard on path and could see him bleeding. Harry hoped his blood was the same as the one by the cabin and whoever had fought him before was a good wizard.

Harry edged forwards out of the darkness, ducked a slow stunner that flew his way and moved to the path. He duelled with the Death Eater guarding the path, spending most of his time uttering the Protego Charm and hoping for a break. Suddenly, the Death Eater lurched forward as if hit from behind and he fell to the ground. Harry was elated for half a second, then distraught for the rest for as the Death Eater fell the last person Harry wanted to see hopped up from behind him.

'Hermione!' Harry yelled, 'I told you to stay at the cabin!'

'I heard noises, good job I came really,' she said calmly, 'Come on.'

But Harry could do nothing of the sort. He had to dive and throw Hermione to the ground as a flash of green light decimated a bush on

the edge of the path. Harry fell right into the pool of blood on the snow and gagged as the snow filled his mouth. He pulled Hermione away as another spell, this one from much closer, snapped a large branch off a tree and fell to earth, missing Hermione by inches.

They got up and Harry did what Hermione would later describe to Ron as 'wand work so fast that I've never even heard of anything like it, let alone seen anything like it.' Harry seemed to have discovered a new duelling gear; three Death Eaters had left the woods and were in the clearing. Hermione was sending spells at them but Harry was somehow able to block all the spells sent at them by the Death Eaters and even hit one of them with a Blasting Curse, sending him flying out of the battle.

However, it was the sight of an unusual Death Eater that distracted Harry. Out of the gloom came one much shorter and skinnier than the rest. His hood wasn't on properly and Harry could make out the top of a shiny blond head. He wasn't using his wand and, in an ordinary situation, Harry would have expected himself to recognise this as a diversion. He didn't, though, and couldn't bring himself to attack an unarmed foe – it just wasn't honourable. It distracted him enough, though, and he watched in terror as two Stunners passed his head and hit Hermione. She went through the air like a spinning top and landed with a heavy thud a few metres back.

Harry left the fight and knelt at her side and whimpered softly. He had let her get hurt...Dumbledore was wrong. Or was he? Harry could feel something inside...something strange and squirmy. It was boiling up inside him and rushing towards his wand hand. It was like the feeling of being on the edge of vomiting; Harry knew it was coming and just had to retch a little more for it to explode. But then he was distracted.

'Not you again!' yelled one of the Death Eaters slightly wearily.

He was blasted off his feet and flew across the clearing. The remaining Death Eaters flew out of hiding, there were six of them in all, not counting the ones who had been taken out already. Harry looked up and saw a man striding through the clearing and his heart lifted.

‘Dumbledore!’ he breathed, but so quietly that nobody would have heard it. But it wasn’t Dumbledore. It was the man from the Hogs Head; his head was no longer hooded and Harry saw his face. He did look remarkably like Dumbledore except his beard and hair were slightly shorter and more grey than the white of the Hogwarts Headmaster.

The stranger started blasting Death Eaters all over the place. For an elderly sort of man he was quite agile, spinning and sidestepping all over the place. One of the Death Eaters was trying to escape and the stranger spotted him, his spell pulling him back like he was on a bungee rope. This man was good, but he was too outnumbered. Harry felt a surge of bravery.

He dived up and ran to the man’s side and together they duelled with the Death Eaters. Trees were obliterated, flashes and sparks threw the clearing into surreal relief, cries and screams echoed into the night and then...

‘Leave him to me...you are all pathetic!’

Harry felt his heart stop for a moment. The high pitched voice...the icy tones...the scything red eyes hanging in the darkness.

‘Run, Harry!’ said the stranger.

But Harry couldn’t run, the appearance of Voldemort had frozen him. The Death Eaters slinked into the shadows as Voldemort stalked forwards. The stranger stood quite still; Harry feared for him.

‘Let’s make this a proper duel,’ said Voldemort icily and flicked his wand at Harry who shot like an arrow into a tree some ten feet away. He hit the ground as Voldemort and the stranger duelled. This was a proper wizards duel; an arrow of fire flew from Voldemort’s wand and the stranger conjured a deluge of snow to cover it in mid air; the stranger flicked what looked like a net of pure energy towards Voldemort but a few swishing actions with his wand and the net was cut up and fell away.

The duel continued and Harry could hear the Death Eaters muttering away. Harry got annoyed with them and started firing spells towards



them. It was, Harry decided, one of the worst decisions he'd ever made. It had the effect of making them all fire back at him and though they missed they did hit something. Harry looked back towards Voldemort as he called for the deluge of spells to stop. Harry's heart sank; the stranger was frozen on the spot, hit by one of the spells.

Harry could only watch in horror as Voldemort raised his wand menacingly and point it at the face of the stranger.

*'Avada Kedavra!'* hissed Voldemort.

A flash of green, a blasting noise, a scream of pain, a scream of horror by the only female voice in the clearing, and a thud. The stranger was dead.

'The old resistance is dead,' cackled Voldemort, 'time to end the new one.'

He stalked towards Hermione but Harry dived across the clearing. Whether through surprise or underestimation of Harry's skills, Voldemort wasn't prepared for Harry to strike him.

*'Incendio!'* Harry bellowed with a voice of pure hatred. An amazing flash of bright blue exploded from his wand and hit Voldemort as Harry landed next to Hermione. Harry looked up at an incredible sight; Voldemort engulfed in angry flames, licking his body and sending his howls of pain into the night sky.

Voldemort put the fire out as soon as he had chance to, though Harry knew he'd caused him pain. He was still smoking as he advanced on Harry with his wand.

'Just try it!' Harry heard himself say, the familiar weird sensation burning in his stomach. Then he had an idea. He turned to Hermione, rapped her on the head with his wand and muttered two spells, one was a Disillusionment Charm and the other a Banishing Charm. Harry heard Hermione land some distance away but wasn't sure where, but at least no-one could see her.

He turned around but felt chains wrap around him. Voldemort had him, there was no escape now. The Death Eaters were cackling in the background as Voldemort stalked to Harry.

‘You fought bravely, Potter, like your father before you. I have to admit I respect that. It won’t save you but I thought I’d tell you all the same. An interesting use of the fire back there. My skin is still stinging, I quite like the feeling. But, enough chat,’ Harry heard a crackle of flame above him, someone yelled ‘Master!’ Voldemort raised his wand again and muttered the Killing Curse as Harry heard a swoosh from above. Fawkes had returned and taken the green light in his mouth and died again. Harry wondered if Fawkes ever got bored of eating the Avada Kedavra Curse, just as Voldemort swung around.

‘You are mistaken, Tom,’ said a voice from the clearing, a voice Harry was immensely glad to hear but had never heard it this angry, ‘when you say the old resistance is dead. Some of us remain.’

Dumbledore cursed Voldemort before he could even raise his wand and he soared across the clearing into the group of Death Eaters. Dumbledore strode across but the enemy fled; multitudes of popping noises echoed around the wood as the Apparated away.

‘Sir! How did you know?’ Harry cried.

‘Where is Miss Granger?’ Dumbledore replied, the concern obvious.

‘Over there, I did a Disillusionment Charm and Banished her somewhere. Don’t know where.’

‘I’m here,’ said a pained little voice from behind a bush. Dumbledore strode across and returned with Hermione, now fully visible. The three of them walked over to the body of the stranger in the clearing. Harry saw a silver tear run down Dumbledore’s crinkled face as he observed the corpse.

‘He fought really well,’ Harry said, ‘Did you know him?’

‘Yes,’ said Dumbledore sorrowfully, ‘we had a unique connection. He’s how I knew what was going on here tonight.’

‘What do you mean?’ Harry asked, ‘How would you know that?’

‘Simple, really,’ said Dumbledore, ‘He’s my brother.’

## Chapter 21: The Day After The Night Before

Dumbledore didn't speak much as he led the way out of the forest. Harry thought it best not to pursue the questions running around his head. He had pretty much worked out that Aberforth must have been sent to France on Dumbledore's orders, and that it was he who called Fawkes to Harry when he was listening to them outside the cabin window. That was the first time he was attacked by the Death Eaters, hence the blood Harry found there.

Harry could barely bring himself to look at Hermione either. She had hurt her shoulder when she landed after being on the end of Harry's Banishing Spell and Harry felt a churning sickness every time he watched her wince in pain. She seemed to realise this and Harry could feel her looking at him, though he still couldn't bare to meet his gaze.

More than anything, though, Harry felt a surging impression of guilt and stupidity. He had been so concerned about Hermione's parents' reaction to him joining them on their holidays that he forgot totally about the wider implications. He hadn't considered the fact that away from places like Hogwarts or Grimmauld Place he was as vulnerable as anybody. He had been so pleased with himself for being granted special privileges from the Ministry to use magic outside school that he hadn't thought about the severity of situations where he would need to exploit the rule. Thinking about it now, Harry felt he had been very arrogant to think the ruling was for him.

After all, Voldemort was a threat to everyone. Hagrid had said once that Voldemort had never been able to take Hogwarts, did this mean he wanted to? Was this part of his new plan? Had the Ministry, under the control of Dumbledore and Mr Weasley, decided to arm the students against such a threat? Come to mention it, how much power did Dumbledore wield to be able to install a Minister for Magic? And of his own choosing. Harry was feeling pressure the likes of which he had almost forgotten.

He had been blinded, blinded by his feelings for Hermione. This was a pretty good excuse, he comforted himself, and not one to be ashamed of. But why didn't he integrate the two? Why didn't he make use of Hermione's brains and intellect and together they could have

been some use to Dumbledore and the Order. Maybe. Harry began kicking stray branches and clumps of snow in his frustrations. He couldn't get rid of the inadequate sensation settling inside him.

They arrived back at the complex, subdued and silent - a stark contrast to the people celebrating at the party inside. Harry felt like he had last year, after Sirius had died. There were people just metres away who were carrying on without a care in the world, as though things were ok. Harry wished he could be one of them.

It was little surprise to Harry when Dumbledore advised them to return early to Hogwarts. He informed the Grangers of the situation and left Harry and Hermione with a portkey while he went to talk privately with Hermione's parents about offering them protection from Voldemort. Harry wondered just how many different things a person could be Secret-Keeper for at one time.

Harry and Hermione didn't wait for Dumbledore to return. Hermione's discomfort from her injuries led them to return to Hogwarts as soon as Dumbledore left them. Harry barely flinched as he touched the cracked old teacup-portkey; the swirling colours, rush of air and spinning of the world as they rushed forwards meant little to him. They landed, quite appropriately Harry thought, in the Hospital Wing. Madame Pomfrey was waiting for them.

'My dear girl!' she cried as Harry helped Hermione up from the floor, 'Professor Dumbledore said you mind need a little mending but this was not what I expected. And you too, Mr Potter! Though I am less surprised at you; you seem to have a penchant for incurring injuries and ailments not becoming with someone your age. Come, sit down, let me see to you.'

Harry sat and watched as Madame Pomfrey tended to Hermione. She gave Harry several smiles, which Harry took to mean she wasn't mad at him, but that didn't seem important. Harry flinched as Madame Pomfrey exposed Hermione's injured arm, which was deep, angry purple and twice its normal size. Hermione gave many a pained little squeaky 'ouch!' and with each one Harry felt more terrible. He had done this to her, maybe not directly, but the fault was his.

He knew now that he hadn't taken Dumbledore's words seriously enough. He hadn't listened properly when he had been told that Voldemort preyed on strong emotion, that he knew that Harry could be gotten to through his heart. Harry got up and started pacing, Madame Pomfrey too busy with Hermione to order him back to bed. Had he taken Dumbledore's claim that no-one could hurt Hermione with Harry around and just flirted with the danger? It certainly felt like it.

The night was cold and still outside. Madame Pomfrey had finished with Hermione, who Harry was relieved to see looked good as new, and was trying to fix him. Harry shrugged her off, his injuries were minor, nothing more than a few cuts and bruises. He would live. Besides, he wanted to feel the pain. Madame Pomfrey took one look into his eyes and decided not to argue.

Harry wanted to talk yet wanted to be angry with himself at the same time as he and Hermione made their way towards Gryffindor Tower. Hermione, as was her way with Harry's state of mind, seemed to know what he was thinking, deciding it was best to let him speak first. As they entered the common room they found it empty, Harry's feeling to stupidity intensifying as he remembered everyone was away for another week. Only a few people were in the common room, those who had remained at Hogwarts for the holidays, and they looked very surprised to see Harry as he entered, especially as he looked like he had been run over several times by the Knight Bus.

He sat down next to the fire and though he'd sat in the chair hundreds of times he never thought it had been as comfortable as it was now. Hermione sat across from him and fixed him with her soul-piercing stare. Harry knew it was time to talk.

'You think its your fault, don't you?' Hermione asked.

'Well...isn't it?' Harry asked hopelessly.

'No! Of course not! Its mine if anything.'

'How do you work that one out?' Harry asked incredulously.

'Well, you wanted to stay here. I made you come away. I was so obsessed with spending the holidays with you that I ignored the dangers. I was just blinded by my-

'-feelings,' interrupted Harry quickly, 'me too. But this isn't your fault if it isn't mine! We've had the same problem here. I wanted to spend time alone with you, wanted to show off my new privileges and I didn't think. I put you in danger, you cant take the blame for that.'

'I put myself in danger,' said Hermione, 'I usually do the thinking, but I didn't this time. I should have know what the dangers were, should have talked them through with Dumbledore. But I didn't. I should have listened to you, I should've stayed with you rather than taking you skiing. I just wanted you alone.'

'Me too,' confessed Harry, 'I just stopped thinking with my brain. I should have insisted on staying here. I wont make the same mistake again.'

'Me neither,' said Hermione vehemently, 'at least if we're both thinking clearly we might not have to do this again.'

'I wonder what Dumbledore will say to me,' said Harry sulkily.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, think he'll blame me for his brother's death?'

Hermione didn't want to answer at once. Harry saw her move her mouth as if about to speak but then closed it to rethink her answer.

'I don't know,' she said honestly after about a minute of consideration, 'no...what a I saying? Of course he wont. There was no way he could have been certain that we would be attacked. He probably just sent his brother to watch us just in case. He was in the pub at the French Village, probably expecting us to go in there, he was around the cabin site. He must have expected that an attack was at least possible.'

'Yeah but it was my fault,' moaned Harry, 'I was the one who made the Death Eaters fire spells that stopped Aberforth. He was doing ok

up till then. He probably had a plan to escape and I caused his death. I don't want Dumbledore to be mad at me.'

'I don't think he will be. Just talk to him in the morning, clear your head. Otherwise, it'll just eat away at you.'

Harry knew she was right. They spent much of the remainder of the night discussing the events. Harry was very glad he was with her alone, feeling that Ron would have pointed out all the most pessimistic of the events had he been there. Harry considered that the conversation must have sounded very bizarre to the handful of younger Gryffindors in the common room but such was his guilt he wanted everyone to know, just so he could be made to feel awful and have his guilt pacified.

He didn't sleep well that night. He spent most of the time sat up, strangely panicked at the emptiness of the dormitory. He felt alone when he needed company. He even got up once to go and try sneaking into Hermione's dormitory before deciding against a night of sliding down the stairs as they became anti-male access. Instead, he paced around the room, or glowered out across the Forbidden Forest, or else stared blankly into the shadowy corners.

When he did manage to nod off for a while he kept dreaming over the battle; the howls of laughter as Aberforth died, the malice in Voldemort's actions, the anger of Albus Dumbledore as he marched on the scene. Harry hoped sincerely that he would never have to face the wrath of Dumbledore. He needn't have worried.

It was almost as if he was expecting Harry to visit him. He said as much himself, as Harry awoke late next morning to find Dumbledore sitting in the chair under the window and watching the owls swoop around the grounds.

'But why? How did you know I'd want to see you?' Harry asked, slightly awestruck by Dumbledore's never ending qualities.

'I knew, because I know you, Harry,' smiled Dumbledore. 'I know that you are probably feeling responsible for Aberforth's death, much as you did with Sirius last year. You feel, I would imagine, that your actions in wanting to spend time alone with Miss Granger has blinded



you to the dangers outside. There may be some truth in this but Harry, never think of this as a weakness or a failing. That your feeling towards Miss Granger are so strong that they rid you of the thoughts of such a threat as Voldemort is a great strength.'

'How so?' Harry asked, feeling increasingly perplexed.

'It shows you know how to live, how to be alive. Voldemort lives only to destroy and to dominate. He cannot be defeated by those who seek the same things. It has been proven time and again. Those who wish only to destroy him have failed.'

'That's why you didn't kill him at the Department of Mysteries?'

'My reasons for that are my own, Harry. But that may well be one of them. It may have transpired that my will to destroy him would not have been able to do so. You see, I would have destroyed him for my own sake; it would have been rather personal and rather selfish, both things that lead down a dark road. Voldemort must be defeated by something more pure, something without any selfish intent. Something more selfless without the quest for glory or fame. You'll understand when the time is right.'

Harry had to raise one more concern before he let Dumbledore exonerate him completely.

'And what about your brother, sir? I can't help but feel I caused what happened.'

'As I suspected you might, but again I must take the fault away from you and place it on myself. You may feel that Aberforth's death was your fault. Both you and Miss Granger will likely believe that you ignored the risks of such a holiday at such a time and are therefore culpable for the events of last night. The fault is mine. I knew the dangers and I ignored them. Both yourself and Miss Granger knew the risks but were too caught up by your happiness at the chance of spending time together that you didn't consider them. Again, I repeat that this is not a flaw; it is the kind of thing that will help you gain the upper hand on our enemies.'

'Aren't you upset?' Harry asked.

'Of course,' smiled Dumbledore, 'but I have grieved and will continue to in my own way. Remember, death is but the next great adventure for the well organised mind. Though I remain unconvinced that Aberforth had such a well disciplined mind academically I believe he was on a high plain in terms of magic and spirituality. I'm not sure he ever learned to read but his powers didn't depend upon literacy. In any case, think of the goats of the world; in that light, Voldemort has done them quite a service!'

Harry couldn't quite believe he was hearing Dumbledore talk about his dead brother in such a way. It was clear, though, that the discussion was over. Dumbledore rose and left the room, graciously accepting Harry's mumbled thanks for his Christmas presents. Harry took a while to get up but eventually made his way downstairs and met Hermione in the common room. She was reading a mixture of Harry's Christmas present and several books on house elf history. Harry assumed her way of dealing with the recent events was to throw herself into her work and her books.

Harry noticed over the next week how vast Hogwarts was without the usual throng of students. Chilly corridors seemed wider and longer, the suits of armour creaked more squeakily and classrooms were lifeless and boring. Harry checked several times in the classroom where Ginny had walked through a wall but all four sides were solid and hard. He thought Ron must've been right, he must have seen Ginny go through the door and mistook it, even though this would mean admitting he was an extreme fool.

Hermione, much to Harry's surprise, didn't talk much about the events of the last day in France. Her normal tact of wanted to get everything out in the open and discuss it to death had been abandoned and Harry had the impression that he wasn't the only one Dumbledore had had a little chat with. Hermione was bright and cherry and Harry was heartened by her love of his Christmas present that at least one good thing had come from the trip to France.

The Hogwarts Express pulled in loud and smoky at the end of the week. Harry and Hermione waited at Hogsmeade station for Ron, eager to exchange stories of their holidays. They had to prize him away from Luna, to whom he seemed a lot colder than Harry had

come to expect. They walked down the path towards the Thestral-drawn coaches and climbed into one. Harry thought Ron was walking differently and not slouching as much, but couldn't put his finger on what it was so said nothing and avoided looking silly.

Ron listened intently as Harry and Hermione recounted the tales of their trip to France, careful to leave out some of the more intimate and potentially blush-inducing moments. Ron seemed interested but his tone was almost indifferent when he finally replied.

'Well,' he said, 'it was a bit obvious, don't you think. I mean, you two go off to France in the wide open, could have been attacked by anyone. And you were in the end. The Dark Lord isn't exactly the kind of person you give a free shot to, is he?'

'The Dark Lord?' Harry asked, 'Since when do you call him that? What's wrong with "you-know-who"? Got boring or something?'

'Does it matter?' Ron asked looking flustered, 'Same guy isn't it?'

'Yes it is. Now, tell us about your holiday before you start asking us loads of questions. I see you did something to your hair,' said Hermione.'

'I did?' Ron said, sounding bemused.

'Yeah, it looks a lot lighter than before. Did you colour it or something?'

'What...um...no, must have been the sun. You know, its really strong in winter over there. Must have done something.'

Just then Ron knocked his goblet to the floor and made quite a fuss of picking it up, fiddling with his shoes as he did. He quickly refilled his goblet and drank quickly, burping loudly as he came up for air. This, more than anything, made Harry more comfortable that Ron was being himself after all.

They went to bed directly after the feast, Harry having to make do with Hermione blowing him a kiss rather than actually giving him one. Harry thought it best not to test Ron's endurance of them too much at

this stage. They had held hand sunder the table during the feast but seemed to agree silently that it was best to ease these things in.

As Harry reached the dormitory he went to the window to look out at the sky, wondering what the weather would be like for the Care of Magical Creatures class on the first morning of the new term. He turned around to find Ron in his bed.

'Um...Ron. What are you doing?'

'Going to bed?' Ron said questioningly.

'Haven't you got enough people willing to share your bed?' Seamus sniggered as he poked his head out of his four-poster.

'Yeah, what are you doing in Harry's bed, Ron?' Dean asked.

'Is this yours? Really? I could have sworn it was mine. Two weeks away, see, and I get delusions of grandeur.'

Ron hopped out and into his own bed and was sending out genuine snores a few minutes later. Harry got into bed himself and tried to sleep, trying to ignore the strange feeling of invasion that his bed was now giving him.

## Chapter 22: The Two Ronnies

Harry awoke the next morning before everyone else. Neville and Ron were snoring away loudly, Seamus was breathing heavily from inside his drawn bed hangings, while Dean was muttering something about a red card. Harry dressed in the pale light of the morning, pulling his robes over his jeans and jumper before making his way downstairs. The only soul in the common room was Crookshanks, who arched his back and began to purr as Harry walked towards him.

Harry sat there, all too aware of the silence of the empty room. Distant rustling and rumblings meant that people were getting up and sure enough a slow trickle of weary and bleary eyed Gryffindors began to pass through the common room on the way to breakfast. Crookshanks had gone, Harry thought his company mustn't be the best at this time of the morning. But Hermione's pet returned some time later with his owner in tow, and she looking surprisingly well rested.

'Morning,' she said brightly. 'Been up long?'

'Half an hour,' replied Harry.

'You should have called me,' said Hermione.

'How exactly? Would you have come if I did?' Harry asked slightly perplexed.

'Course,' chirped Hermione, who Harry thought seemed in a very good mood, 'shall we go to breakfast?'

'Shouldn't we wait for Ron?'

'Why? Has he forgotten the way?'

Harry wasn't sure how to answer this, thrown by Hermione's indifferent tone, so just followed her to the portrait hole.

'You seem in a good mood today,' Harry said

'Do I?' Hermione beamed, 'Good night's sleep I expect.'

'No, I don't think its that,' Harry persisted, 'I had a decent sleep but you don't see me bouncing along the corridors.'

'I am *not* bouncing!' Hermione said indignantly, 'Well, if you must know, I had an interesting chat with Lavender and Parvati last night.'

'Really? What about?' Harry asked, though darkly suspecting it had something to do with a dark haired bespectacled boy that Lavender and Pavati's favourite teacher often predicted a premature death for.

'It was about you, actually,' said Hermone brightly, Harry found he wasn't surprised, 'well...when I say you...I actually mean, "me and you".'

'What about it?' Harry asked, liking perhaps a little too much the mention of himself as Hermione as a pair.

'Well, they were asking about us going away, what we did and things. Don't look like that! I didn't tell them anything important. But anyway, they just seemed really pleased...said we looked cute together. Its put me in a good mood that's all. I think we should tell Ron as well, you know, just get it over with.'

They had entered the Great Hall by this time and it was quite full of students, Harry wished they could continue this conversation a little more privately. Hermione, however, was unperturbed.

'First, though, we need to sort out ourselves,' she said, a slight hint of anxiety in her voice.

'How do you mean?' Harry asked, 'I thought we'd sorted that out already?'

'Not officially. But we might as well do it now...before we get interrupted. I only have to ask you one thing: am I your girlfriend, Harry? I mean, if anyone asks me, can I tell them that?'

She looked nervous and apprehensive, blushing madly and staring at Harry as though trying to burn eye marks into him.

'I'd like you to,' said Harry slowly, 'Its up to you. But I'd love to be able to call you that...you know, if anyone asks me.'

'Great,' beamed Hermione, 'that's settled then.'

She shifted up a little closer to him on the bench, taking his hand as she did so. Harry thought it might be a little harder to eat with one hand but didn't complain. Several people noticed them both holding hands on the table, but not one person mentioned it. As Ginny entered with Ron a little while later she noticed it and made the first comment about it, asking Harry if there was anything wrong with his hand. Hermione replied the negative in quite a sharp tone and received a disgusted look from Ginny in response.

Ron seemed quite indifferent to the whole thing. He gave the connected hands a quick, disparaging look but didn't say anything. He was quickly distracted by the morning post, which included a large box of sweets from home. Harry thought Mr Weasley's new job must be bringing in plenty of money as Ron didn't usually get extra sweet gifts apart from at holiday times.

Throughout the first class of the Day, Harry noted a strange new facet to Ron's behaviour. His sarcasm, usually so bleak and pessimistic, had taken on a definitive snide and curt edge. Whether through the sight of Harry and Hermione so close together or not, Ron's attitude to them both was bordering on the nasty. He seemed to be picking up on the slightest thing that Hermione was doing wrong, which wasn't much as Hermione tended not to make mistakes in class. The trend continued through to Charms where Ron seemed to be taking pleasure in belittling Hermione.

'You're still doing it wrong!' Ron squealed as Hermione's charm to make scrubbing brushes clean a pan by themselves went wrong, causing them to scrub Neville instead, 'its not such a big flick of your wand. And you have to really pronounce the incantation. No, still not right!'

Harry wanted to stop Ron, who was now just poking fun at Hermione, but he couldn't really argue with him. He was right after all, though Harry suspected it was Ron's comments that were putting Hermione off her work. They went off to lunch with Hermione and Ron

exchanging moods; Ron now happy and bubbly, Hermione dark and moody. Harry thought he might be able to cheer her up by holding hands with her as they walked towards the Great Hall. Several Slytherins passed them and sniggering but Harry's plan worked; Hermione grabbed his hand and squeezed it tight, swaying it in time with their footsteps as though trying to show it off to the passers-by.

They ate quietly at lunch, Harry feeling like he was the eye of a huge storm that was just waiting to explode. Ron wasn't making so many comments now, hardly surprising when his mouth was full of mashed potato and peas, but Hermione was still clearly not happy with Ron, despite her better mood with Harry. She cut a figure of an extreme schizophrenic; on the one hand she was bubbly and playful with Harry, but turn her to face Ron and she was mutinous and wore a look of thunder.

It was strangely ironic then that going down to the dungeons to Potions was a happy moment for her; she perked up greatly when Ron left to go to Herbology, casting an envious look towards the dungeons, clearly wanting to continue his sparring with Hermione. Harry wrenched his hand free of Hermione's as she queued up outside the Potions classroom, explaining to Hermione that he didn't want to give the Slytherins any more reason to laugh and point at them. Hermione reluctantly agreed that their relationship wasn't an exhibition for Slytherin amusement.

Snape swept into the dungeon ahead of his class and Harry followed Hermione to seats at the back, happy that he would get to work with her again.

'Quieten down all of you,' snapped Snape curtly, 'we have a lot to get through today. I have marked all your work on the Veritaserum Potion you made last term and I have been singularly surprised that all of you managed to concoct a fairly decent version of the serum. Even Mr Potter, whose potion I am unhappy to say was one of the best, managed to survive beyond my earlier prediction of Halloween and remains with us,' the Slytherins guffawed behind their hands.

'This term, however,' continued Snape, 'will be extremely difficult. I expect you all to be able to brew the latest potion I set you within four



weeks. This potion is not dependent on solar movement but requires a precision brewing pattern that will put your new found proficiency to the test. It is called the Empathisia Draught. Can anybody...not you Miss Granger...tell me what this potion does?'

'It makes you into someone else,' piped up Pansy Parkinson excitedly.

'No,' said Snape, sounding disappointed, 'that is the Polyjuice Potion.'

'No,' explained Pansy quickly, 'I meant it makes you into someone else. It makes someone else have things of you in them. Like if I drank a bit of your Draught, Professor, I'd be really clever and could even make it so I'd be as good looking as you.'

Harry could see Pansy gawping at Snape with eyes that searched for his approval. The corners of Snape's mouth twisted into a sly smile and his eyes flashed as though they were dying to look gloatingly around the room.

'That's better,' said Snape, though his voice was still silky, 'This potion will allow the brewer to imprint parts of his or her personality onto someone else. Or, conversely, drink a potion brewed with the essence of another person, presumably to improve themselves. If you wished to be athletic, take a piece of a Quidditch player and brew the potion like that. If you wished to be more intelligent, follow Miss Parkinson's advice. A potion can also be brewed so that you can be almost completely taken over. Its like the Polyjuice Potion without the painful physical transformation. Copy from the board.'

'Wonder why we're learning this potion,' said Harry, thoughtfully.

'Don't know,' replied Hermione over her quill, which was scribbling furiously across her parchment.

'Because, Mr Potter,' said Snape coldly from behind Harry, who was continually amazed by the way Snape could move around so silently, 'the brewing procedure for this particular potion bears a striking similarity to the one we will be attempting to make before Easter. This potion requires fine distinctions and a lot of concentration, two things you lack in worrying amounts.'

He swept away leaving Harry flushing with humiliation and trying not to meet the consoling look that he was sure Hermione was sending to him. He couldn't deny that Snape was correct on one point; the potion was difficult. However, the one thing about having Hermione as such a close friend was that you got to work close to her also. In Harry's pre-Christmas determination to improve his Potions work he had swept to joint top of the class and was confident that he could remain there. He was pleasantly surprised when, at the end of the lesson, Snape reluctantly agreed that Harry's progress with his potion was the best in the class. Hermione, despite being bested by Harry for a rare occasion, was beaming with pride at him, throwing looks around the classroom in much the same way as Snape had when Pansy had called him good-looking.

When they met up with Ron in the Entrance Hall after the lesson Hermione went into raptures about Harry, waxing lyrical about how he had remained focused in the face of Snape's taunting and beat him.

'It's the best way to answer him, Harry,' she cooed, 'if you do everything he asks, and do it well, he cant criticise you. He has to praise you, and just think how much he hates that.'

'Yeah,' Harry agreed vehemently, 'how was Herbology, Ron?'

'*Herbology?* Is *that* where I was? I wondered what I was doing in the grounds,' said Ron, he sounded totally stunned at this information and looked very disorientated.

'Are you ok?' Hermione asked.

'Yeah, you look like you've only just learned how to walk,' said Harry with a smirk.

'Yeah...yeah I'm fine,' said Ron distantly, 'I've been like this most of the holiday. I cant remember what I'm doing half of the time, or where I've been. I think Ginny must be putting the Imperius Curse on me, or possessing me.'

'What?' Hermione cried, horrified.

'Relax!' Ron said, equally as emphatically, 'I was only joking! Jeez, Hermione, you need to take things with a pinch of salt.'

'Why did you mention Ginny for then?' Hermione asked accusingly.

'She always seems to pop up around me. Saw her just then, asked me if I was ok. She was talking to me quite weirdly, like I was going to hit her or something. Every time I turned to face her she cowered away. Have I done something to her? Has she said anything to you?'

'Nah,' Harry said dolefully, 'hardly ever speaks to me these days.'

'Me neither,' added Hermione, 'except to scowl at me cos I'm going out with Harry?'

'You two are going out!' Ron cried, Harry grew wary, expecting Ron to explode with anger, 'about time. How did your holiday go anyway? I hope you took my advice about not getting up the duff.'

'Ron!' Hermione cried sounding scandalised, 'Do you have to be so crude? Besides, we told you about our holiday. Last night, remember?'

'Did you?' Ron replied sounding a little overwhelmed. 'See what I mean? I'm going mad, honestly. Shall we make a start on our Divination homework?'

They had reached the common room and sat down in their favourite seats by the fire. Crookshanks ambled up to Harry and Hermione, rubbing himself against their shins. He seemed uncertain about Ron but after a few sniffs decided it was ok to deposit some of his fiery orange fur on his robes too.

'There you go, Ron,' said Hermione happily, 'Crookshanks has given you some fur to add to your hair. Hey, have you dyed your hair again? It's darker again.'

'Didn't realise it was lighter,' said Ron vaguely.

'What are you on about Divination for anyway?' Harry asked. 'We dropped that last year.'

'Oh yeah,' said Ron blankly, 'I need to be put down I think.'

Ginny popped her head around the door a few moments later and took Ron away to discuss something personal; Harry thought it would be too rude to ask what.

'Something's not right with him, you know,' said Harry thoughtfully to Hermione.

'I know what you mean,' she replied 'he's come back from Norway acting very oddly. And I'd love to know what's going on with his hair. Anyway, shall we get started on that Potions homework? It shouldn't take too long considering how you know it all. Maybe I'll have to copy off you for a change.'

Harry knew she was only joking but appreciated the sentiment all the same. The homework didn't take that long, but Hermione pretending to copy Harry's answers got a bit tired after a time and Harry wanted to tell her that the joke was over. She seemed to read his mind, though, and stopped of her own accord.

After dinner, to which Ron wasn't present, Hermione decided to sit by the fire and get warm while continuing her never-ending production of elf clothes.

'Think about how cold they must all be,' she said desperately. 'I haven't been leaving out clothes for ages and the poor elves I haven't freed must be so cold. You'd better help me, Harry. We'll get it done quicker.'

Harry thought maybe he could help her, but his idea of help involved a straight jacket and a padded room not a woolly jacket and padded hat. Still, she looked happy and Harry decided to again leave the confession that Dobby and Winky shared all the clothes she left out and that no other elves had yet been freed.

Harry was in bed long before he heard Ron enter the dormitory. Ginny's problems, Harry decided must be many and varied to have required Ron's attentions for so long. This kind of behaviour always made Harry suspicious, and it wasn't helped when Ron tried to climb into bed with him.

'Oi! Do you mind?' Harry hissed.

'Oh, sorry. Its rather hard to see in the dark. Night, Harry.'

Ron stumbled into his own bed, Harry heard him slurping a last drink before sleep and heard him breathing heavily shortly after, meaning he was asleep. Harry couldn't sleep. Ron's actions had awoken in him the dormant memories of before, things he'd forgotten for various reasons, mostly Hermione. He was tired but wanted to stay awake, to see if Ron would start to talk in his sleep again.

How long he stayed away, forcing his eyes to bore into the darkness of his bed canopy. He was startled by a soft pressure on the end of his bed and tried to reach for his glasses to see what it was. It was only when he felt sharp claws digging into his leg as they walked towards his chest that he recoiled.

'Crookshanks!' Harry whispered 'What re you doing here?'

Harry thought it a little dumb to expect the cat to respond but did so anyway. Crookshanks' only response way to lay himself down between the crook of Harry's body where he lay on his side. Harry could hear the cat purring as he got comfortable, his eyes illuminated by the moonlight streaming in through the window. His head, Harry could see, was raised slightly and pointed through the darkness towards Ron's bed. Somehow, this made Harry feel safe; having Hermione's cat guarding him was strangely enough to make Harry grow drowsy.

The purring was dying away. The sound of Neville's usual snores was drifting into the background and into nothingness. Harry was slightly amused to find himself suddenly on a lawn, looking at a house he'd only seen once before. It was a grand manor, fallen into some disrepair. Ivy crawled upon the face of one side and many of the upper windows were broken; somehow Harry knew that boys from down in the village were responsible. But what village? Harry would have bet his Firebolt that there was a village near by, but wouldn't have bet his copy of *Unfogging the Future* on guessing its name. Or the name of the house, though he was equally as sure it had one.

Harry ventured towards the door, feeling oddly confident on such a warm night. That struck him as odd; it was the middle of a particularly cold winter yet it was quite warm here. He must be abroad, he reasoned. How could it be so warm if he wasn't? The handle of the door wasn't warm though, it was cold steel but at least it turned quietly enough. Harry had the overwhelming sensation to be quiet, so the well-oiled door handle was a major plus point.

The house was dusty inside; Harry was in a spacious kitchen whose cupboards looked as though they had never been opened. Harry found his way across to the kitchen door and tip-toed through it, his steps making no sound on the lino flooring. There was something upstairs, something Harry had to see, had to reach. He couldn't think for the life of him what it was but mild curiosity mingled with the electric thrill of dread was what eventually tipped Harry over the edge.

There was something about the stairs, though, something familiar; was it the banister? No. The carpet maybe? No. Hold on...there wasn't a carpet. There was a layer of dust many inches thick. That was it! That was what Harry found familiar. It wasn't the dust itself, but the appreciation of it for muffling his footsteps. That triggered a memory in Harry's brain. That's what reminded him of being here before, for now he knew where it was...and the thought froze him.

Harry finally regained control of his legs, or rather they took control of him. He wanted to move back, to edge downstairs and race away to safety. But his legs were taking him upwards, through the dust towards the only room with a light. It was flickering, as if from a dying fire but it was there.

Harry stopped at the door, heart pounding and pulse racing with a crippling sense of foreboding. The door opened involuntarily and Harry yelled without sound. Ron was on the floor, clearly dead with his open mouth frozen in a screaming position. There was another body next to him, but on no account was Harry going to look at it. Instead he listened to the high cackle of evil laughter that swam around his head, punctuated only by Ron yelling his name.

Hang on, wasn't he dead?

'Harry, HARRY! Wake up!'

Harry woke with a start, looking blindly around the darkness and flinging Crookshanks to the end of the bed, where he dug his talons into Harry's ankle. Harry wiped a hot trickle from his cheek and looked at Ron, who he could see was white despite the darkness.

'Ron! What's the matter? What's going on?' Harry said desperately.

'Nothing, nothing,' said Ron quietly, 'I...I just have to tell you something. I've had one funny dream to many, and so have you by the sounds of it. I...I think I'm in trouble Harry, I need help. Will you help me.'

'What? Now? What time is it?'

'I just need to talk before...before I cant. Please, Harry,' pleaded Ron.

'Ok. Lets go downstairs.'

## Chapter 23: Confessions of a Dangerous Mind

*'Incendio!'*

Harry was filled with a thrill of expectant dread as he pointed his wand into the fire and lit it. He was about to find out about Ron's peculiar behaviour, and maybe get an insight into the plans of the person responsible. He also knew it would mean forcing Ron to admit he was at fault, something both hard for him and enjoyable for Harry on a sadistic level. He hoped that feelings such as this last one would go, he didn't like thinking so poorly of his best friend.

Ron was shivering with the cold, his dressing gown was a hand-me-down and was becoming rather threadbare. His slippers, too, were ragged and had holes in the soles, which must have chilled Ron's feet on the cold stone floor. He stumbled nervously across to a chair by the fire and stared into the flames, now crackling briskly in the hearth. He didn't look at Harry for several minutes.

Harry himself was getting restless. He knew he couldn't push Ron on this; it was he, after all, who had woken Harry in the middle of the night for this little chat. Harry wanted badly enough to know what Ron's explanation would be, to ruin the opportunity by letting his lack of patience get the better of him. He smoothed Crookshanks, who had followed them down from the dormitory and Harry had the inkling that once the debate was over the cat would return to his owner, ready to recount the night's events when she woke. The ways this would be achieved occupied Harry's mind until Ron spoke.

'Harry...I'm in danger,' said Ron bluntly. These weren't exactly the words that Harry was expecting to hear but he could tell from Ron's voice that they were sincere.

'How? What danger are you in?' Harry asked.

'I don't know...I just am. People are trying to hurt me, or people close to me. They'll hurt me if I do what they want and hurt me if I don't. I just don't know what to do anymore.'

'Who's trying to hurt you?'



‘I don’t know. But I know they are.’

Harry was starting to get frustrated Ron wasn’t making any sense and talking in riddles. He seemed reluctant to give any information, reminding Harry forcibly of Dobby when he disobeyed the Malfoy’s whilst under their ownership.

‘I need more than this, Ron,’ said Harry frankly. ‘And considering you’ve woken me up at...whatever time this is, I think you owe me more than this meaningless double-talk. How do you know...whatever it is you know?’

‘I can *hear* them, Harry,’ replied Ron pointedly, ‘in my head. They come into my dreams when I sleep, sometimes I can be in class and they start speaking. They always take different forms; sometimes a man, other times a snake, even a great beast that was like a fire monster. But the voice is always the same; horribly cold and high pitched and without any feeling at all, I’ve even heard my own voice go like that. But I don’t know anyone with a voice that sounds anything like it.’

Harry did. He was about to tell Ron who he thought the voice might belong to but he looked so terrified and white, possibly at the thought of Voldemort possessing him, that Harry thought the news that the voice probably did belong to Voldemort would probably kill him.

‘How long as this been going on for?’ Harry asked.

‘Quite a while, I’m not sure how long.’

‘What does it feel like? How do you know when its happened?’

‘Sometimes I black out. Other times I can find myself doing stuff and cant remember why or how I started doing them. Like, I can be in class, writing notes and not know how long I’ve been doing it. I had this before we came back to school this year, before we met in Diagon Alley. It got worse over Christmas. My mum thought I was going mad cos I kept walking into things and was acting all distant. Its really scaring me, Harry.’

Harry felt sorry for Ron, and quite useless in his inability to ease his best friend's fears.

'What kind of things does this voice make you do?' Harry asked.

'I don't know, I can never remember,' said Ron ruefully, 'I forget it when I'm awake but I can remember bits when the voice talks to me in my dreams. But you know what its like trying to remember details of your dreams, its almost impossible. I've got a pretty good idea what the overall aim is though...'

'What?' Harry asked, though he thought he knew what was coming.

'I think...its all about you. Hurting you...or...or worse.'

'And when you did these things, all these things designed to hurt me, you just did them? You didn't try to resist at all? Harry said, his temper bubbling away somewhere below the surface.

'Like I said, half the time I don't know what I'm doing. Its like I'm in my body but someone else is controlling it and there's nothing I can do. Sometimes I do things but don't know I've done them till its already done. There have been a few times when I haven't had a choice; the voice says its going to hurt my family. Ginny especially. It knows things, private things about me and about my family. Its scary, Harry. Its made me tell lies...do things...I've tried to fight but I'm not strong. I cant throw it off. I'm not...I'm not...you.'

It was this last line that threw Harry. He had been expecting Ron to concede his failings but not directly devalue himself against Harry. It stunned him and left him unable to respond for a few minutes, during which Ron went quite red and became very interested in the patterning of the fire surround.

Harry leant forward, his head resting on his interlocked fingers. Ron looked at him out of the corner of his eye, a look that said he expected Harry to gloat at Ron's admission that Harry was better than him. Though he had wanted to do this before, all such thoughts were gone from his head.

‘So...you’ve done things,’ said Harry thoughtfully, more to himself than anything.

‘Yeah, but nothing violent,’ said Ron trying to redeem himself, ‘mostly it was just things to get you angry. Kicking you off Quidditch, getting between you and Hermione once I knew you both fancied each other, being really horrible to everyone. I had to make you mad, make you do something terrible so you’d be really angry. For some reason, I was told to make you feel strong emotion.’

‘So,’ continued Harry, again mostly to himself, ‘he wanted me to feel strong emotion. Maybe so he could lock onto me. If I was angry he could get to me, pinpoint me maybe. But why? He couldn’t have gotten me out of Hogwarts.’

‘I hope ‘he’ isn’t the person I think you’re on about,’ said Ron, terror sliding around his voice.

‘Maybe he wanted to distract me.’ Harry went on, as though Ron hadn’t spoken, ‘He wanted my back turned, my attention elsewhere so that I’d miss the bigger picture. He knew he couldn’t get to me directly, like last year. He’d expect me to have worked out that I shouldn’t trust everything I see in my dreams. So he had to throw me off course another way.

‘Dumbledore said he knew my heart. *He knew my heart!* That must mean he knew about Hermione...what I was starting to feel for her. He knew that if something happened to stop us being together it’d distract me enough to throw me off the scent completely.’

‘But why not just hurt her?’ Ron asked mortified.

‘Here? Couldn’t get to her. Dumbledore...the teachers. No chance. Why not go for her parents? Maybe he didn’t think of it -’

‘- or thought Dumbledore would’ve protected them,’ suggested Ron enthusiastically.

‘Yeah. So he had to do something else. Make things harder for me so that I’d focus on Hermione alone as my one good thing...then take it away. You turned against me...I lost my Quidditch place...I bet he

made Lucius put old Draco up to that newsletter thing. Just to help out, and maybe hurt me in the process. Once I was out of it and depressed completely he could target me, for whatever he wanted, even to keep me out of the way. Then his other plan could kick into play. But what's the plan?'

Ron didn't answer. Harry frowned at the thoughts in his head. There was more going on here, he was certain of it. He felt like he had a jigsaw with all the important bits missing. Then he had a thought.

'I was attacked on holiday,' he said musingly, 'they tried to kill me. Obviously the plan with Hermione didn't work cos she didn't fall for it. But the other plan must still be in place. And it probably still involves you. Ron...did anything weird happen to you in Norway.'

'No, well, unless you include Ginny pushing me into a fjord and I woke up with a bump on my head half a mile away.'

'Ginny! Yes, that's it. Ginny's been acting weird too. Glazed eyes, vacant expression, that day in Hogsmeade when I saw...'

Harry heard his voice trail off as a sickness erupted in his stomach. He looked at Ron, his expression pained and expectant. Was this really the situation? It didn't make much sense but it was a start.

'When you saw what?' Ron pestered.

'I saw her...talking with...well, with Draco.'

'Malfoy?'

'How many other Draco's do we know? Hold on!' Harry found his eyes drawn to Ron's hair, his mind remembering the ways he had been talking at times since he returned from Norway. Another idea entered his mind.

'I'm still holding on!' cried Ron desperately.

'Oh...yeah, sorry. Its just...well, have you drunk anything funny lately?' Harry asked.

'No...but, now you mention it, there's this odd bottle of weird stuff under my bed. Tastes foul, thought it might have been one of Neville's herbology projects. Why?'

'Its just that, in Potions, we're making this Draught that make you like someone else. Sort of like the Polyjuice Potion without changing shape. I was thinking what Hermione said about your hair being lighter, and about you trying to sleep in my bed and talking in a drawl and, well, Malfoy-ish. Maybe you've been drinking this Draught.'

'So what are you saying?' cried Ron as if he was being violated, 'I've been drinking essence of Malfoy and being a git?'

'Its just a thought,' said Harry lightly, 'It just makes a bit of sense. Malfoy was kicked out, so he wants to help out daddy and get back at us. Somehow, he gets to Ginny, maybe his dad taught him the Imperius Curse! Yes! That's what he was doing that day in Hogsmeade. He makes her take the Potion from him and feed it to you...then makes her do things against her will. She's been controlled before, remember? Maybe it makes you weaker if you've been possessed before.'

'Hey, here's a thought!' Ron said loudly, 'Maybe that's why Snape's started teaching you that Potion. He's making it and giving it to her to feed to me. That's why he's doing it with you. It's a good cover if he says it's a project.'

'Or,' said Harry somewhat reluctantly, 'maybe it's a clue.'

'A clue for what?'

'To me. It seems a bit pointless to learn it. He said so himself, more or less. Said it was like another potion we have to make. Maybe he cant tell me what he's up to cos Voldemort - stop wincing - will know he's betrayed him. He's a spy for our side. Maybe he was trying to hint to me that the potion was part of the plan, so I have to worm it out of him.'

'Is that likely?' Ron asked doubtfully.

'I don't know, maybe its Dumbledore's idea. I'll ask Snape in my next class. Aaah! I haven't got Potions till Wednesday. Never thought I'd complain about that!'

There wasn't much more to say and after ten minutes or so of refining this wacky theory Harry decided it was time for bed and made his way up. Ron, professing that he would never sleep again, stayed by the fire. He still hadn't entered the dormitory by the time Harry had fallen asleep

The next day trickled by as if taunting Harry by showing how slow it could be when he wanted more than anything for it to fly by. He filled Hermione in on the theory during Transfiguration and she was so distracted by the idea that she accidentally transfigured her racoon into a skunk, which immediately let off a foul smelling odour and the classroom was emptied for several minutes whilst Mr Filch fumigated the place.

Harry, himself, paid so little attention during his Care of Magical Creatures class that while learning to destroy a Chizpurfle infestation he accidentally spilt two jars of potions. These potions were never meant to be mixed and the upshot was that the mixture caused several small explosions and set fire to the Chizpurfle tray, promptly killing the parasites. Hagrid, who loved devastation of any kind, applauded Harry on the discovery of a truly effective purging method, awarding him top marks.

The afternoon Defence Against the Dark Arts class was an experience; Dumbledore deciding to demonstrate non-incantation duelling with Harry as his assistant. By the end of the class Harry had been transfigured, banished, summoned, shrunk, chained up, tickled until he cried, and even made to experience a terrible nightmare - Dumbledore transfiguring his school robes into a blue, sparkly magician's assistants dress. The headmaster's idea of a light end to the class not concurring with Harry's idea of a good time.

Still, he forgave Dumbledore when he explained that he'd seen the vision in Harry's mind during Occlumency and didn't mean it as an offence, though Harry thought he looked truly offended when he commented that it was the sort of thing Snape might do. What

concerned Harry more than anything was the oddly furtive looks Justin Finch-Fletchley kept casting him as they left the classroom.

The lesson-inspired teasing had been discarded by dinner time, Harry's sole train of thought concerning Snape and getting some answers. Had he been less preoccupied he would have ordinarily realised that there were other people he could talk to in aid of his quest for understanding, namely Ginny Weasley. So consumed was he with his only thought, however, than any other sensible, and logical, sidebars went out the window.

Ron, Harry was happy to say, was his normal self. His hair was still dark and fiery and his dry wit still intact. No signs of his Malfoy transformation had been seen all day, though he did confess to a growing desire for more of the mixture in the bottle. Again, if it wasn't for his focus on Snape, Harry would have thought to ask Ron for the bottle so he could destroy it.

'You know, funny thing,' said Ron through a mouthful of chicken pie, 'the only time I've felt clear throughout this entire experience is when I'm talking to Luna. Isn't that weird?'

'Maybe its because she's a bit Loony,' said Hermione curtly, though Harry couldn't tell if this was due to her low opinion of Luna or her disgust at Ron speaking with his mouth full, 'perhaps she was so out of it, like she normally is, you thought she was a kindred spirit!'

'What do you two talk about anyway?' Harry asked, making sure he swallowed his food first as he could feel Hermione's gaze on him.

'This and that,' said Ron evasively, 'she does most of the talking. Gets me to talk about myself a lot. She talks to herself all the time. Always muttering, just under her breath. So I cant hear it, you know? Its weird. Never shuts up.'

'Probably wondering is there's a Crumple Snouted Whatsits Face nearby,' smirked Harry; Ron looked oddly affronted.

The next morning finally arrived and Harry felt like he'd betrayed his most valued principles when he was the first to turn up for Potions. He hoped it would be worth it, otherwise he'd never be able to forgive

himself. Snape breezed in to the class shortly after the last of the stragglers, of which Harry was usually one, stumbled into line. Harry sat at the back with Hermione, who looked nearly as anxious as Harry felt.

Harry wasn't able to concentrate and as a result his potion didn't come out very well, a fact Snape picked up on immediately. This time, however, Harry found himself glad that Snape had picked on him.

'Well, well, Potter,' said Snape silkily, 'back to your usual standards I see. I knew it couldn't last. Shall I vanish this now? Or leave it for all to see, an example of just how wrong a potion can be brewed. Perhaps...' his eyes bored into Harry's for what seemed like an eternity, 'your mind is otherwise engaged. Dare we hope your intuition is a little better than your potion-making?'

He whispered the last part and Harry felt certain he had communicated his intent to Snape when he looked in his eyes. It hadn't worked in Professor Umbridge's office last year but maybe Snape had brushed up since then.

It certainly seemed so. At the end of the lesson it was Snape who called Harry back to stay, much to his surprise.

'Close the door, Potter,' said Snape quietly as Hermione disappeared through the door, 'do not speak. This is regarding that homework project I set you. The one on the Draught we are working on? I assume you have...well, *got to grips* with it by now. Judging by our little chat earlier I can see that it still needs more work. However, I am not here to help you directly, I never give help personally to any student. However, I understand Professor Dumbledore is teaching you the subject I was *unable to*. Maybe you will succeed with him, though I doubt it. Perhaps, if you work hard in that lesson you will gain an...*insight* that may be of some use to you. And by the looks of things you need all the help you can get. Now get along with you.'

Harry stalked up the staircase and out of the dungeons mulling over Snape's words. They made no sense, he wasn't good at logic. He didn't have the understanding. For this he needed brains, he also needed someone good at riddles. He needed -



‘Hermione...what do you think?’

Harry had recounted the conversation with Snape as the man himself made them take long notes on banshees during their Defence Against the Dark Arts class. Snape hadn’t looked at Harry once and he got the feeling that Snape was purposefully avoiding him, as if afraid his look or voice would imprint a mark on him, one Voldemort could interpret. It was as if Snape were afraid of this, but whether for himself or Harry was anyone’s guess.

‘Well,’ said Hermione pensively, ‘if you’re right and Snape can’t tell you directly then what does he mean about Dumbledore? The only thing I can think is it has to do with Occlumency. Would that help you in any way?’

‘Yes...yes! I can’t believe I didn’t see it before! Why can’t I be as smart as you? You’re supposed to have brains or beauty...it’s so wicked that you have both!’ said Harry vociferously.

‘Do you mind keeping your pillow talk to the...well, *pillow*, Mr Potter?’ said Snape coolly, several people sniggered.

It didn’t matter, though; Hermione had cracked it. Harry remembered Dumbledore saying that he would get to face Snape in an Occlumency battle once he was ready. Snape’s message was cryptic but Harry now had it deciphered. He reckoned that Snape would allow him to break his mind to show him whatever it was that would help him along. Either that or he would put the thought into Harry’s Pensieve, or his own, for Harry to see. Either way, Harry now had a purpose: he had to learn to read minds, before other minds did their damage.

## Chapter 24: Weasley's and Riddles

Harry was pleased when eight o'clock finally rolled around; Charms, as last lesson of the day, had dragged so much that Harry didn't enjoy learning the otherwise fun Invigro Charm, which made inanimate objects come to life. They had practised on labour-saving devices earlier in the term, which had been a giggle at the time, but this lesson they tried the Charm on different things, namely toy soldiers - popular Muggle children's toys. They made them come to life and fight real battles, which would have been hugely enjoyable on almost any other day.

But Harry had just one thought on his mind; get to Occlumency, run over his theory with Dumbledore and see what the Headmaster thought of it, and if it was plausible. He was relieved to find the stone steps awaiting him, as he arrived for his lesson, but didn't let them carry him up as they revolved, choosing instead to vault upwards taking two or three steps at a time. He knocked the door a little more heavily than was needed.

'Come in, Harry,' said Dumbledore cheerily. Harry obliged, easing down the door handle and stepping into the beautiful circular room. He sat down opposite Dumbledore, his fingers twitching with anticipation, his wand screaming out to be withdrawn and used.

'You seem rather keen this evening,' continued Dumbledore, 'nice to see you have rediscovered your motivation.'

'Yeah...I have to break Snape's mind,' Harry blurted out.

'Really?' Dumbledore said in a voice of mild surprise, 'Have you a reason for this sudden urge?'

'He knows something, something about Ron. I don't think he can tell me because Voldemort will know. But if I learn to break his mind, I can see what he knows. It'll be like an accident, so Voldemort won't suspect anything.'

'That's the theory anyway,' smiled Dumbledore.

'Yeah...the, what? How do you know?'

'Well, being my theory, one would expect me to know its intricacies, its pitfalls. It isn't much of a plan if the risks are not anticipated.'

'I'm confused,' said Harry.

'The Empathisia Draught, Harry,' explained Dumbledore, 'I asked Professor Snape to include it on your syllabus for this term so that you may work out what I have surmised for some time; that your friend, Mr Weasley, has been under its influence for quite a while. You see, you have quite correctly worked out that Professor Snape cannot outright say what he has overheard regarding the plans that Voldemort has involving your friend. He cannot say them to you or to me, as Voldemort has performed a sort of Fidelius Charm on the knowledge. He cannot reveal its secrets to anyone, but that is not to say they cannot be forced from him. That you are proficient at Occlumency is a point that Voldemort has overlooked. His lack of attention to detail will be his undoing yet again.'

'So what's the plan? I assume there is one,' said Harry.

'You assume correctly. The plan Professor Snape and I have formulated involves you breaking into his mind. The problem is that you have to do it properly; at the moment all you can do is enter his mind. You need to be able to wield complete control over it in order to access a specific memory. Once you have done this, you must perform a charm that I will teach you closer to the time to transfer the memory to yourself. It will then be deposited into your Pensieve and both you and I will take a look at it.'

'When the time is right?' Harry queried, 'You mean we can't do it right away?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Dumbledore heavily, 'you see, Lord Voldemort demands update reports from his chief spy, Professor Snape. He, of course, feeds him false or otherwise useless information, hence his need for superb Occlumency skills to conceal his untruths from Voldemort. He was able to convince Voldemort that monthly reports would have to suffice, as anything more frequent would arouse suspicion. It takes Professor Snape this long to wipe the imprint of his associations with us from his memory, so that Voldemort is unable to tap into them. Our little meeting with Severus Snape will take place

when he returns from his latest jaunt to Voldemort, at the end of January. We have to practice hard till then.'

And this they did. Harry hadn't been doing too well at his Occlumency for some time and after this lesson he really felt it. He was shaking so much on the way back to Gryffindor Tower an hour later that he felt like he was skipping down the corridor. He turned on his heel at the portrait hole and made instead for the Great hall to catch a last minute dinner. He was surprised to find Hermione waiting for him.

'How did it go?' she asked, an air of concern about her.

'Yeah...fine,' he replied, running his hands over his head.

'Your scar looks white,' said Hermione anxiously. 'It doesn't normally look like that.'

'Doesn't it? Oh...its probably because Dumbledore did Occlumency the way Snape used to tonight. It was weird...worse, somehow, for Dumbledore to see my worst memories than Snape.'

'Why?'

'Dunno,' said Harry gravely, 'with Snape it was embarrassing, but with Dumbledore...its like I'm weak and I don't like him seeing that. Anyway, wanna hear Dumbledore's big plan?'

And he recounted Dumbledore's words in between mouthfuls of steak and chips. Hermione just listened and nodded, somehow more relaxed now that she knew Dumbledore was behind the Occlumency plan. She let Harry eat relentlessly as she talked equally as ferociously about the success of her new '*SPEW and You*' campaign. Over the chomping in his mouth Harry made out that Hermione had managed to attract ten new members to her free-the-house-elves club since adopting a less aggressive recruitment tactic. As long as it makes you happy, Harry thought...

Ron was more active in his excitement at Harry finally getting some answers to the riddle of Ron's behaviour, though he was distraught that he would have to wait a fortnight for them. Especially as he had

endured another episode, involving him waking up in the cabbages in the grounds smelling of burnt tyres.

Ginny was eyeing them all suspiciously in the common room. Harry was equally as keen to find out her role in all this as anything else. Her suspect behaviour was as much, if not more, of a concern for Harry because he couldn't keep track of her like he could with Ron. This made her more of a variable in the equation, one Harry needed to know the value of in order to calculate how much of a danger she was.

The next few days trickled by with no real incident, unless you counted Terry Boot melting a cauldron in Potions, and Harry melting a tray in Care of Magical Creatures when he set fire to a Salamander. Though he suspected the creature wasn't entirely as innocent as Hagrid made it out to be.

On Saturday, Ron reminded Harry that now that the second Quidditch match of the season was approaching they would need to work hard if they were going to win. The team now consisted of Ron as keeper, Seamus and Dean as the new Beaters, Ginny and Alicia Spinnet, who had needed to retake her last year in order to get higher NEWT grades (she wanted to become a Healer, which needed top marks and Alicia was just short of these), were joined as Chasers by third year Natalie McDonald, which left Harry as reinstated Seeker. It wasn't as good as the team which had won the house Championship when Harry had last played a full season but Harry was encouraged by Ron's optimism.

'Seamus and Dean aren't bad beaters, both are strong and fly fairly well,' said Ron appraisingly as he and Harry watched the other team members flying around the pitch, 'then we've got Ginny and Alicia who are pretty good and that Natalie is stacked...I mean, has things stacked in her favour. Good flier...can catch, etc.'

Ron went rather red.

Harry didn't take it up any further, just smirked at Ron and kicked off the ground as the Captain smirked back. Flying was Harry's favourite thing in the world, except his fairly new love of being with Hermione alone. It was hardly surprising; it was the first thing in the magical

world that he could do well, do naturally that didn't need any tuition. Harry circled the pitch at top speed to a chorus of appreciative whoops from Seamus and Dean. Harry knew he was showing off but didn't care; as long as he was on a broom he knew he was good enough to show off.

Harry saw Hermione again in the stands, watching the practice. She waved with one hand, her other holding a pair of binoculars, the ones Harry had bought her at the Quidditch World Cup. He was surprised that she had kept them, but found that he was quite glad that she had. He felt touched over what seemed like such a minor thing, but also felt he should be slapped for acting so soppy.

Luna was there as well. As before she sat a few rows below Hermione, quite on her own. She was holding an unnecessarily large banner bearing the legend '*Weasley is Our King*' in red and gold ink. Ron, Harry noticed, had gone a shade of red to match his hair at the sight of the banner, and was unfocused and unable to speak much for the rest of the practice.

It was lucky for Harry that the other team members knew the training routines off by heart due to Ron's embarrassment-induced paralysis. Harry learnt there and then why everyone had come in so tired after practice before; the moves were faster, more complex and required more effort both physically and mentally than anything even Oliver Wood could have devised. It wasn't helped by the frozen weather and the icy wind whipping the players' faces and stinging fingers already struggling to hold onto frozen broom handles.

Harry was glad when they all shivered and shuddered back into the castle an hour and a half later, remembering how good a cure a gruelling Quidditch training was and making you forget your worries. Hermione was waiting in the common room having dashed off once training was over. Harry was overjoyed to see her holding a jug of steaming butterbeer and mugs for three.

'Hermione! Where did you get that?' Harry asked, grinning.

'I've got contacts in the kitchen,' she beamed, 'shall I serve?'

'You'd better,' said Ron as his teeth chattered.

They sat there for several minutes in relaxed silence; Harry wondering at the marvellous effects of hot butterbeer on a cold body. When they did speak it was idle chitchat about lessons and homework. This is how its supposed to be, Harry thought. This is what school would be like if Voldemort wasn't trying to kill me and I wasn't either the saviour or the last hurdle to destruction of the magical world. Strangely enough, he found that only half of him thought this was a nice ideal. Secretly, Harry suspected, he quite enjoyed the excitement and interest of an extraordinary life, even if it did come close to ending on a regular basis.

'Well, Ron,' said Hermione suddenly, and with quite a pointed tone, 'I see Luna was there again tonight. Your own personal cheering section. I think she fancies you, you know.'

Harry looked at her and saw her grinning cunningly. Half of Harry's mind was leaning towards the idea of Hermione teasing Ron, but the other knew that she was tuned into the female psyche enough to make her bold statement a real possibility. Her tone bristled with an undercurrent of encouragement at the idea, killing any little lingering doubts that had resided in the deepest of Harry's mind that she might have feelings for Ron.

'She does not fancy me!' cried Ron, blushing like a girl.

'She might do, mate,' said Harry debatingly, 'I mean, think about it. You always go on about how she follows you around...you could say like a lovesick puppy,' Hermione choked on her butterbeer, 'and she's number one fan of "Weasley is our king," what's that say to you? Are you her king, Ron? Are you? *Are you?*'

'No,' snapped Ron, getting quite angry, 'no I'm bloody well not, so just drop it.'

'Ok, ok, calm down,' said Harry.

'Yeah, we were only teasing,' added Hermione soothingly.

'Well don't,' said Ron sharply, 'neither of you like being teased so just lay off. I don't want to hear that again, ok? God, I'm annoyed now. I'm going to bed.'

And he stormed off towards the dormitory.

'What's wrong with him?' Hermione said scathingly; Harry just shrugged.

Ron wasn't to be found anywhere on Sunday, and Harry found this very perturbing. He strongly suspected his vanishing act was not entirely of his own doing and for this reason Harry was very eager for him to return before he did any damage. Harry and Hermione searched the castle and the grounds twice to try and find him, but saw neither him nor anyone he might have hurt. This last point, at least, was of some comfort.

Ron turned up, at last, in the evening, just after dinner. He looked bedraggled and tired, dirty from head to foot. Harry thought he looked like he'd been wrestling with Grawp.

'Ron, where have you been!' Hermione yelled, not too unlike Mrs Weasley.

'I've been out.'

'Out? Out where?'

'In the grounds. Looking.'

'Looking for what?' Harry asked fearfully.

'Ginny,' said Ron absently, Harry felt his stomach churn horribly.

'Ginny?' Hermione asked, nervously. 'Ron...what have you done?'

'Nothing,' said Ron earnestly, 'Luna asked me if I'd seen her. She said she had something to give her so I went to get her but couldn't find her. I've looked all over and she's nowhere. I've been searching the Forest, you know, in case I went all Mr Hyde and did something terrible. I only gave up cos I'm so cold.'

'We have to go and see someone, tell them,' said Hermione urgently, Ron waved his hand.



'Already been to McGonagall, she said she'd look for her. But that was ages ago. If she had found her she would have...'

Just then, as if by psychic coincidence, the portrait hole swung open and Professor McGonagall herself entered, her face a shade of white that drained all hope from Harry's mind.

'Weasley...we have found your sister. I think you'd better come with me. Mr Potter? Miss Granger? Perhaps you would like to accompany me?'

They shot up and made after Ron who was on Professor McGonagall's robe tails. She led them away from the common room and on a route Harry knew all too well and it couldn't have meant anything good for Ginny. They were heading for the Hospital Wing.

They entered the ward with Ron shaking with guilty anticipation. Harry couldn't help but think he had every right to feel this way, knowing that whatever had happened to Ginny was very likely Ron's doing. They found her in the middle of the ward, quite unconscious in a bed under the window. A large, black mark had been scorched across her face like some oily tyre track.

'We found her like this,' said Professor McGonagall gravely, 'well, it was actually the Gryffindor Ghost who found her, just over an hour ago. She was in the corridor outside the girls' bathroom. This thing,' she gestured at the black mark, 'seems irremovable and we think it is keeping her unconscious. All our normal treatments have failed to revive her. I don't suppose any of you have any idea what this may be, or who may have done it?'

Harry looked at Ron, whose blank gaze was fixed on Ginny though not really seeing her at all. Harry nodded the negative to Professor McGonagall's question, seeing Hermione doing the same; Ron seemed to be in too much shock to respond. Professor McGonagall sighed in expected disappointment and left, saying she would leave them with Ginny. Hermione pulled chairs around the bed and they all sat.

Silence weighed heavy on the atmosphere in the ward. No-one spoke, no one seemed brave enough. Harry didn't have the words, and was

sure Hermione felt the same. It was Ron who spoke after some time, but didn't say what Harry expected.

'Its my fault,' said Ron, Harry didn't agree verbally but knew he was right, 'if I wasn't so weak I wouldn't be controlled. If I wasn't close to you, I wouldn't be a target. Well, they've gone too far now. I'm sick of this. There is one person whose fault this is, and its time I dealt with him.'

Harry felt the aggressive look from Ron and registered suddenly what he was saying; so, apparently, did Hermione.

'No, Ron,' she said, her tone mixture of fear and warning, 'you and Harry aren't going to fight again.'

'Harry?' Ron said surprised, 'No, not Harry. The only fighting we're going to do is alongside each other, I hope. No, I'm going for the real person responsible.'

Harry hoped he wasn't going to say what he thought he would. He wasn't exactly relieved when he didn't.

'I'm going for Malfoy,' said Ron flatly.

'What?' spat Harry, as much in surprise as anything, 'Don't be silly. You cant...'

'Oh, I see?' Ron said angrily, 'its ok for you to go and fight whoever you want but when I do it its silly?'

'No, I didn't mean...'

'I don't care what you mean. I only want to know one thing right now: are you my friend?. I'm going to fight Malfoy, and I'm going now. If you were ever my friend you'll fight alongside me. I'm leaving. You coming...or not?'

A/N: Is this story getting boring yet? My major reason for carrying on is that people are reading it and liking it a little, despite the flaws. I get the impression its slowed down quite a lot, I just hope it isn't putting people off. By the way, have I done something wrong with my

summary to put people off the story. There's one story on the site with 111 reviews after just ten chapters! How the hell do you manage that? I must be doing plenty wrong somewhere.

## Chapter 25: A Little Distraction

Ron didn't wait for a reply, but the hem of his school robes had barely whipped around the door of the Hospital Wing before Harry was off his feet and on his tail, Hermione close behind. Ron was striding down the corridor with purpose and vigour and Harry considered that it wouldn't have mattered if he hadn't followed him. The corridor was gloomy and draughty and Harry struggled to move very fast as a cold breeze swept up his robes and kissed icily against his thighs.

Harry and Hermione had to move quickly to keep up with Ron and after a few corridors were positively sprinting along in his wake. Ron, upon hearing their footsteps echoing past him, and sped up as well and was no closer to being caught. Harry and Hermione followed Ron to the top of the large staircase that led down into the Entrance Hall where he leapt down several steps at a time and reached the bottom. Harry followed suit as Hermione's dainty footsteps followed behind as she took just one stair at a time.

'Going somewhere?' asked an icy voice from the shadows; for the first time, Harry was glad to hear it. 'You know, neither of you have an ounce of common sense. You'd have thought, being perennial school rule breakers and meddlesome fools who always get themselves in serious danger, that you'd have been a little more aware of the steps taken on such a night like this. Alas, anger - or, though the thought chills me, teen hormones - seem to have gotten the better of you all again.'

Snape's lip curled in muted satisfaction. He loved nothing more than a spot of pupil-baiting, especially when Harry or his friends were the pupils. His tone was almost joyous, though riddled with the usual contempt he reserved for conversations with Harry.

'Excuse me, Professor,' asked Hermione politely, 'what did you mean *on such a night as this?*'

'I'd have thought that would be obvious,' said Snape coolly, 'a student has been attacked by forces or persons unknown, so, naturally, the school is on high alert. I would have thought you three, of all people, would have known this. Clearly, brotherly love isn't all its cracked up to be.'

Harry, who had stood between Ron and Snape as a precaution, was glad of this decision; he was able to subtly hold Ron back as he felt him make for Snape. In his mood, Harry wouldn't have been surprised if Ron had attacked anyone, even himself.

'Did you think you were simply going to waltz out of the school?' Snape asked silkily.

'I was not waltzing anywhere!' snapped Ron, losing all control over his frustrations.

'And where exactly, might I asked were you planning to go? Do you know, perhaps, the whereabouts of the culprit responsible for this attack? Anything to confess can be done so here.'

There was something accusatory in Snape's tone and Harry thought it likely that Snape had his own suspicions at the identity of the attacker.

'I don't know anything,' snarled Ron, his teething grinding like a rabid dog, 'out of the way, Harry.'

Ron slid around Harry and made for the door but Snape swept soundlessly across the flagged stone floor and blocked the way.

'Destination, Weasley, or I cannot let you pass.'

'*Out of the way!*' Ron growled.

'What's the password?' Snape taunted, 'Tell me where you are going and I shall let you go.'

'Move, *Snive-*'

'Finish that sentence and you will be in detention for the remainder of the term,' said Snape silkily.

Ron conceded defeat in that he was never likely to pass Snape, turning on his heel and marching huffily up the staircase. Harry turned to follow before Snape called him back.

'You go with him, make sure he doesn't hang himself or something,' said Harry to Hermione before turning to face Snape.

'I hope you are working on that homework project, Potter,' said Snape, his tone now one of stern seriousness, 'it is imperative that you work hard, you must not fail in this task. Hope is unwisely placed in you, Potter. You will be letting a lot of people down if you fail to live up to your unworthy fame.'

Snape swung around and disappeared into the shadows of an adjoining corridor. Harry didn't make for the stairs, instead choosing to sit on the stone steps leading down into the grounds. The stone was cold and Harry shook involuntarily as he sat upon it. There was something about Snape's words, or rather the way he'd said them. Something in his voice. He talked of hope and somewhere, in his frosty tone, Harry heard that he, Snape, one of Harry's long-standing enemies, had hope in him. Hope to defeat evil and free Snape from his dangerous double life. It was in this moment that Harry began to feel the enormity of the task facing him.

His feet felt heavy as he plodded up the stairs towards the Gryffindor common room. Harry felt as if the weight of pressure on his heart and mind had somehow slinked down into his ankles. The incident with Ginny, Harry was sure, was merely the tip of the iceberg. The attack on her was a meaningless sideshow to the main event but it brought home to Harry the callous seriousness of the threat. Nobody was safe; not good people, not the bad people who would want to fight them, not the innocent, the guilty or the beings not involved. No-one would be safe until he, Harry, had freed them of Voldemort's shadow.

'Where have you been?'

It was Hermione; she had emerged from the portrait hole, Harry finding himself quite surprised that he had managed to find the way without thinking.

'I just sat outside...thinking,' said Harry vaguely.

'About what? Did Professor Snape say anything useful?' Hermione asked as she clambered back through the portrait hole.

'No, just more dire warnings about learning the finer points of Occlumency,' said Harry, purposefully avoiding Hermione's first question, 'where's Ron?'

'I sent him to bed,' said Hermione lightly.

'What...without any supper?' Harry smirked.

'I thought he could do with some time alone, I don't think he wants company right now. At least if he's in the dormitory he can't go anywhere. Besides, I thought we could spend some time together. We haven't for a while.'

She was smiling expectantly at Harry and he felt himself relax and cheer at the prospect of some one on one time with Hermione. He thought fleetingly that this was a better pastime for distraction than hard Quidditch sessions. It was certainly much less exhausting and had the advantage of being an indoor activity.

He and Hermione just sat on the hearthrug in front of the fire for a little while, talking about everything unimportant. Harry knew that Hermione was steering the conversation away from anything that might involve Occlumency, Voldemort, Snape or the end of the world. Harry was glad of her consideration.

The common room began to empty slowly as the night wore on. Harry lost several games of wizards chess, though he felt Hermione was being a little too supercilious in her celebrations; after all, it was at least partly Harry's awfulness at the game that contributed to his dreadful performance. Hermione also darned a few socks for the house-elves as Harry stared into the crackling embers of the fire and, for the first time in ages, he felt a pang over sorrow for Sirius.

'Are you ok?' Hermione asked quietly, sensing the change in Harry's mood.

'Yeah,' he sighed, his throat feeling a little choky.

'You're missing him, aren't you? Sirius, I mean.'

'How did you know? Can you read my mind or something?'

'Sometimes,' smiled Hermione, 'its just obvious...the way you're looking into the fire like that. I remember that look, the same one you wore every time you wanted his help. It was like you were waiting for his head to just pop out from the flames.'

'I was,' snorted Harry, amazed at the accuracy of Hermione's observations, 'Just how much time did you spend looking at me?'

'A bit...' said Hermione, blushing a little as a shy grin replaced her naughty smile. She got up and left her knitting to its own devices, sitting down against the nearest armchair and beckoning Harry to her. He obliged, and scuffed his way across to her open arms. She wrapped them around his shoulders and he rested his head on her chest. Her heartbeat was strong and quick, her breathing slightly heavier than Harry thought it ought to be.

He didn't complain, though; Hermione running her hands gently across his weary temples and through his hair was incredibly relaxing. He closed his eyes and breathed in Hermione's scent, feeling that the thoughts creeping into the depths of his mind were completely inappropriate. He tried to ignore them, but slipped an arm around Hermione anyway, his hand circling uncertainly at the base of her spine.

This had the effect of changing things about Hermione. At that moment, Harry realised how good Hermione was at concealing her emotions or feelings. By the looks of her, you'd think she was as composed and relaxed as if reading a good book, but from the vantage point of her ribcage, Harry knew this wasn't the case.

Harry thought he must have found a tender spot on Hermione's body because as he smoothed her back, in awkward and unsure ways, he felt her breathing shoot up to a level that couldn't have been much away from hyperventilation. At the same time, her heart had begun to beat so hard that it was giving Harry earache.

The upsurge in Hermione's natural processes weakened Harry's defence against the thoughts gaining momentum in his head. He was quite pleased that they weren't impure, mostly musings about the softness of Hermione's skin in this tender spot. The rational voice in his mind was telling him that he should be more concerned with Ron



and that this was a most inappropriate time to be exploring his burgeoning physical relationship with Hermione. The problem was that this voice sounded very much like Hermione, sending his thoughts back to her. It was like a vicious circle, one Harry was only half certain he wanted to break free from.

The common room emptied slowly until Harry and Hermione were left alone in front of the dying fire. The light was flickering away as Harry heard the last person to go to bed mutter mutinously that Harry and Hermione should 'get a room'. Harry wasn't sure what this meant but it was an idea that had its merits. Hermione seemed to have been waiting for the room to empty for as soon as the last person disappeared she slid down the armchair until her face was level with Harry's. He thought she looked positively sultry in the firelight, her face glowing slightly and her eyes shining and alive. He felt his heart thundering with anticipation.

Hermione didn't waste anytime. She placed her arms tightly around his neck and drew him to her, kissing him softly. They slid down to the floor, their embrace unbroken and increasing in vigour. Harry felt a strange sensation, like he was daring against the most terrific risk. He had broken rules plenty of times, been caught out of bed on many occasions but this was more intense. It wasn't like in France; the idea that they could be caught sent a tingle of thrill through Harry. Mixed with all the other tinglings and flutterings going on inside Harry was sure something was bound to explode from him.

There was muffled sound somewhere; Harry tried to ignore it as Hermione's kisses became yet more intense and left his lips for parts of his face and neck, which tickled irresistibly. There was another noise, a knocking against a table, and the unmistakable sound of someone cursing. Harry and Hermione looked up guiltily, Harry finding himself partly surprised to see Ron standing before them. He had his wand in one hand, his Cleansweep in the other.

'Ron, what are you doing?' said Hermione loftily.

'Could ask the same thing about you two,' said Ron with an suppressed grin.

'I think *that's* pretty obvious,' said Hermione, unabashed, 'what about you.'

'I'm leaving,' he said casually, 'I'm going up to the top of the Astronomy Tower and I'm going to fly away. Fancy coming? I hear it's a popular haunt for pupils in your...well, *situation*.'

Harry grinned in spite of himself, torn between embarrassment at being caught, the deviant thrill of *actually being caught*, and concern at what Ron was trying to do.

'You aren't going anywhere,' said Hermione firmly, 'the teachers are patrolling the corridors and besides, the door's been locked shut by magic.'

'What? That *colloportus* charm I expect. The one you used on those doors in the Department of Mysteries. Alohamora opens them.'

'Not unless the witch doing the Colloportus Charm is more powerful than the deluded young wizard about to try the Alohamora one. Fancy your chances against Professor McGonagall, Ron? Go on, try. Bet you can't open it.'

'Could you?' Ron asked.

Hermione seemed stumped and Harry thought this wasn't a good thing. Hermione wasn't the competitive sort, but would she resist if Ron challenged her magical talents? Harry wasn't sure.

'Well?' pushed Ron. 'Could you.'

'I don't know,' said Hermione thoughtfully, 'I doubt it.'

'Will you try?' Ron pleaded.

'Not if you paid me!' she said firmly, 'And you aren't about to do that?'

'You sound like Malfoy,' said Ron scathingly, 'Sure you haven't been taking this potion too?'

'I'm sorry, Ron,' said Hermione aghast, 'I didn't mean-'

'I know,' said Ron gently, 'Now will you help me? Or I'll have to hold that comment against you. You wouldn't want that on your conscience would you?'

'I'd want your expulsion on my conscience less,' she said flatly, 'I'm not helping you.'

'Oh come on, Hermione!' Ron cried, 'Help me to get out then you and Harry can go back to your smooching session.'

'Go back to bed and we can carry on without us worrying,' said Hermione sexily, 'It isn't worth trying. I'm not going to help.'

'Help me or I'll...I'll...' Ron looked around for inspiration, his eyes settling mischievously on Harry, 'Or I'll hex Harry's privates off!'

'You wont for two reasons,' giggled Hermione as Ron's triumphant look faded, 'one: do you really think I'd let you hex Harry,' Harry noticed her wand was suddenly out and aimed at Ron, who was eyeing it warily, 'and two: me and Harry are quite a way from that stage in our relationship so he could do without his bits for a little while, at least until Madame Pomfrey could reattach them. She's good with things like that.'

Even Ron chortled at this, though Harry found the whole topic quite disturbing and painful. Ron seemed to have abandoned his latest escape attempt though. He slumped down in the armchair next to the one Harry and Hermione had been leaning on and eyed them devilishly.

'Oh, don't mind me,' said Ron slyly, 'you two carry on!'

'No way!' cried Harry, 'You little perv! Where were you planning to fly anyway?'

'I told you, to Malfoy!' Ron said exasperatedly, 'He's behind this. I get to him, its all over.'

'Missing the bigger picture a little, aren't you mate?' said Harry pointedly.

'What do you mean?'

'Do you think this is some little plan of Malfoy and his dead to get to you? Or me, or Ginny or whoever. Is that really what you think, that's he's behind this?' Harry wanted to point out his belief in Ron's naivety in his tone.

'Who else could it be?' said Ron blindly, Hermione sighed next to Harry.

'Who d'you think?' Harry said heatedly.

Ron still looked blank.

'Um...Mr Voldemort ring any bells?'

The colour drained from Ron's face faster than spiders fleeing from a basilisk. Harry was quite stunned at the level of Ron's blatant stupidity.

'You mean,' began Ron, 'that you-know-who is behind this? He wants to get to me and made me hurt Ginny?'

'More than likely,' said Harry, he thought quickly about how telling Ron about the Occlumency thing was a mistake, realising that he, like Snape, could be reporting in some way to Voldemort himself.

'So,' said Hermione, taking over in Harry's pause, 'if you decide to go flying off in search of revenge against Malfoy you're likely to find more than you bargained for.'

'Yeah, namely the guy who murders people for just looking at him the wrong way. You have to fight him and you'd have-'

'- about as much chance as a rat in a tampon factory,' Ron interjected heavily.

'Ron...that is absolutely putrid,' said Hermione with a look of unrelenting disgust.

'Sorry,' said Ron, smirking towards Harry who thought better of returning the grin.

'Look,' said Hermione, her lip still curled in a snarl as she looked at Ron, 'just go to bed. There's nothing you can do that the Order or Dumbledore can do. And besides, there's no proof that you actually did anything to Ginny. We just suspect you did. When she wakes up she can tell us what happened. Until then, don't beat yourself up. Just go to bed, get some rest. Its been a tough night.'

'Ok, I know where I'm not wanted,' said Ron slyly, 'just don't be too naughty. You never know who's watching.'

Ron slouched off towards the dormitory and Hermione turned towards Harry, who was feeling a little paranoid after Ron's words.

'Now...where we were,' whispered Hermione breathlessly, 'oh...now what?'

'I'm so sorry to interrupt...*whatever* disgusting act you two are about to engage in,' said Snape as he slipped through the portrait hole, 'but Potter, you are to come with me now.'

'Why?' Harry asked bluntly.

'Things have changed,' said Snape evasively, 'something has happened. Our little Occlumency experiment has been brought forward. Come Potter, we do this...tonight.'

And he swept from the common room and Harry, trepidation and fear rippling though his skin, followed close behind.

## Chapter 26: The Hands of Friendship

Harry found himself strangely aware of the swishing sound Snape's robes made as he strode along in front of him. This was despite the ricocheting echo of both their footsteps on the cold stone floor and Harry's heartbeat, so loud and strong that he was sure it would spring forth from his chest at any moment. He was trying to deal with the constant pulsing at his temples and in his throat, trying fruitlessly to ignore the foreboding and nervous anticipation that had filled his heart.

He was dreading the thought of what had happened to change the plan that Dumbledore and Snape had formulated. Snape had mentioned it when he had summoned Harry from the common room but his words had hardly been specific. The only point of comfort was that Ron couldn't be responsible, for he was, and had been, locked in his dormitory all night. The knot in Harry's chest eased slightly, but nowhere near enough to calm him.

It wasn't just the thought of his destination that both excited and terrified Harry at this moment. He was still buzzing after his passionate kissing session with Hermione, events of this nature had become scarce for Harry since his return to Hogwarts and the nervous thrill still accompanied each one. Part of Harry, oddly a feeling originating in the pit of his stomach and working downwards, wanted to stay with Hermione, carry on from where Ron had interrupted them. But this, Harry knew, was simply not an option.

Snape turned sharply on his heel at the end of the corridor, the change of direction catching Harry unawares. He was expecting this quick march to end in Dumbledore's office, but instead Harry found himself gliding down the main staircase. Snape turned again here, heading down towards his office in the dungeons. This destination merely served to heighten Harry's feeling of dread and increase his anxiety.

Snape pushed open his office door and waited for Harry to enter, before slamming the door behind him. The office was empty but Harry noticed Snape's Pensieve sat alone on the Professor's desk, completely emptied of thoughts.

'Right, Potter,' said Snape sharply, 'events have taken a rather unexpected downturn so our Occlumency plan must be put into immediate effect.'

'Where's Professor Dumbledore?' Harry queried.

'The event that had taken place has called him away, I shall be joining him as soon as this is over with. I am unswervingly dubious at Dumbledore's claim that your Legilimency skills are greatly improved since our last bout of lessons last year. But, regardless, I have no choice but to allow you to do this.

'In order for this to be made swift and easy for you, I am going to allow my mind to be weakened by you. I am going to let you curse me Potter, a privilege that I'm sure you will revel in. However, it is our mutual dislike of one another that may help us here.'

'I don't understand,' said Harry, slightly taken aback by Snape's open honesty about their less than hospitable relationship.

'Potter, shut up and listen,' snapped Snape, 'In order to weaken my mind to make it controllable for you, you will need to use a curse that does a similar job. Do you have any in mind that are easy? That you know how to use?'

'No,' said Harry dumbly. Where was Hermione when he needed her?

'Exactly,' said Snape with his air of superior disdain. 'Therefore, I am going to allow you to use a mind control curse on me. Yes, Potter...the Imperius Curse. I will not fight it, but I warn you now, any more than the allotted time I give you and I will hurt you seriously.'

'Got it,' said Harry.

'I will let you have a whole minute in control of my mind,' said Snape warily. 'After that time, this buzzer will sound and you are to release the curse. I believe you know the incantation. For now, though, let us see if you can use the Legilimens spell.'

Harry nervously raised his wand, shaking violently in his hand. His pointed it at Snape, not sure whether to aim for his head or his heart, not that he really believed him to have one.

'What are you waiting for?' hissed Snape, 'Point your wand and incant!'

'Legilimens!' said Harry meekly. Snape laughed.

'Is that the best you can do?' he taunted. 'Clear your mind of all thoughts. If you can't do this, think of only one thought, preferably one you like. Maybe,' Snape gulped as if he were about to vomit, 'that little incident I happened upon when fetching you from Gryffindor Tower.'

'Legilimens!' Harry said again, the thought of Hermione's lips against his own fresh in his mind.

For a second, but only a second, Harry had a flash of Snape sitting alone, as a teenager on the Hogwarts Express. But then it faded.

'Again! Concentrate harder!' cried Snape.

'Legilimens! Harry cried with vigour. Again he saw flashes; Snape cowering in a corner while an angry male voice yelled from the dark shadows; Snape being told he hadn't got the Defence Against the Dark Arts job the year it went to Lockhart; Snape watching Slytherin lose at Quidditch, where a Chaser with messy black hair scored several times in quick succession. But that was it.

'Clearly, my mind is too advanced for you,' said Snape with a patronising air of smugness. 'We shall attempt the Imperius Curse. Think of a horrible memory and say the incantation.'

'Imperio!' Harry said. Nothing.

'What are you thinking of?' said Snape, his voice scathing.

'Living with my Aunt and Uncle,' said Harry blandly.

'That isn't good enough,' shot Snape, 'Its too vague. Think of something worse.'



Harry wracked his brains for a bad event; it wasn't too tough considering the multitudes of tribulations that Harry had had to endure in his life. But he had enjoyed, by and large, the last five and a half years of his life and thinking of something that had angered him was proving tough. His first thought was Voldemort, but his anger over that had been delayed and secondary as he couldn't actually remember it. Next was Sirius, but too large a part of him grieved over this to make him angry. His thoughts from Sirius led him to Umbridge, that would do.

'Imperio!' Harry shouted. For a moment Snape's eyes unfocused but they were soon back to their malicious self.

'You aren't trying, you aren't concentrating hard enough!' yelled Snape.

'I am trying!' Harry yelled back. 'What am I supposed to do?'

'Think harder! We haven't got time for your many flaws to get in the way.'

Harry felt an anger rise in his chest; Snape noticed it, his eyes flashing with malicious intent.

'Yes,' he said in dark thought, 'our last resort. Do you like your mother, Potter?'

'What?'

Harry's attention had suddenly pricked up. He was looking suspiciously at Snape. What was he trying to do?'

'Your mother, Potter,' said Snape in his most deadly tone, 'when you think of her, do you like the thought?'

'What do you mean?'

'Are you really this stupid? *What-do-you-think-of-your-moth-eerr?* It isn't hard. Although it may be for you, considering how she's dead.'

The anger bubbling inside Harry went up a notch.

'Don't talk about my mother,' said Harry dangerously, 'like she's some insignificant potion ingredient or something.'

'But that, in a way, is what she is,' said Snape so silkily that his tongue might have slid off. 'She is little more than a statistic...another number to add to the list of the Dark Lord's list of murdered people. She was thought of as gifted, though I never thought so. Fairly proficient at Charms, and we have you as an example. Though a bit dim-witted if your best charms involve you dying to work properly.'

'Shut up!' cried Harry, his teeth gnawing against each other.

'Truth be told, Potter, your mother had low standards, particularly when it came to relationships. Mind you, she had plenty of opportunity to test the waters of the male species. She must have been with half the boys at Hogwarts while she was here, if the notches on her bedpost are anything to go by.'

'My mother did not have notches!' Harry was positively screaming now.

'You're sure of that are you? Then, would you believe, she went against everything she'd preached about for years and started carrying on with that no-good, waster of a father of yours. By then, she had set her standards so low that she could bring you into this world, though how many versions of you were terminated before they found one they couldn't undo is anyone's guess.'

That was it. Harry lunged at Snape but he reacted quickly, conjuring a sort of wall of invisible tar that Harry couldn't move through.

'What the hell are you doing?' Harry yelled at Snape. 'You wanted me angry, I'm angry. Now let me go!'

'You want to hurt me?'

'Yes!'

'Why don't you curse me?'

'Great idea! Let me go!'

'You'll curse me?'

'Yes!'

'You hate me?'

'YES!!!'

'Then curse me!'

'PETR-'

'NO! No. Curse me, damn you...CURSE ME!!'

'*IMPERIO!*'

Then it happened. Harry felt a spell of such force fly from his wand that when a calmness came over him it was surprising. He looked at Snape, his eyes bleak and empty. He could make him do anything...anything at all. But Hermione was talking in his mind, telling him not to. Harry felt in a daze, in a world with no sound where only air had meaning. He gazed at Snape, his anger ebbing away in the serenity of the power he felt. Then...

BUZZZZZZZ

Harry woke from his slumber and lowered his wand instinctively. Snape fell to the floor, before standing slowly.

'Good, Potter,' he said deeply, 'Now, try the Legilimency spell. If it works you must concentrate with all your will, even though you have little. When you see a glimpse of myself talking with the Dark Lord and Lucius Malfoy focus on it. Will it to come back. If this is successful, place your wand to your head and mutter the Summoning Charm. Once the thought is in your mind extract it and place it in this Pensieve. Do not view it until Dumbledore returns. Try it, now.'

'*Legilimens!*' Harry bellowed. He felt a rush of thoughts and memories, quite not his own enter his mind. All the things he had seen before flashed before him, including a few images he remembered from last year. Then, a memory came in that Harry did not expect.

It was as if the flood of memories had slowed right down to this one particular remembering. Harry, in Snape's position, was at the back of a very large crowd. Next to him, a younger version, maybe twenty years or so, of Snape was cowering against the side of an old building, trying not to be noticed. People around were cheering and laughing; this was a happy day. Harry noticed everyone was either in dress robes or fancy gowns and suits, except Snape who was in his usual black robe. It was a party of some sort.

Loud bells rang out above them and the cheering erupted as two large wooden doors creaked open to Harry's left. People whooped and called, throwing handfuls of small bits of paper and what seemed to be rice. Then it dawned on Harry; he must be at a wedding. Why would one of Snape's worst memories be a wedding? Harry noticed that Snape was the only person not throwing confetti, instead standing back and looking sullen and moody. Then the happy couple emerged.

Harry's jaw dropped, for there, unmistakably, in his wizard's best was an extremely handsome, pre-Azkaban Sirius, glowing in the morning sunshine. Harry was shocked, he never knew that Sirius had got married. His shock deepened moments later as another person emerged from the doors and stood next to Sirius. There, in an undoubted groom's outfit, was a messy haired, bespectacled man, arm-in-arm with a very pretty woman with long auburn hair and dazzling green eyes.

What the hell was Snape doing at my parents wedding? Harry said this out loud, though nobody could hear him. He stared at his mother in her long wedding dress and his father, beaming with pride and shaking hands with those around him as he was whisked away by Harry's mother. To where, Harry never found out as the image faded and was replaced by an equally as startling one.

Briefly, as though the rush of thoughts had sped up again, Harry saw Snape in conversation with Malfoy's dad, in the shadow of Lord Voldemort. Harry was joggled to his senses, and tried to concentrate hard. He realised he must have been doing this earlier as the image slowed, though the words of the conversation became slurred and slow. Harry put his wand to his head and muttered 'Accio' as the

power of the Legilimency spell wore off. Harry pulled his wand slowly from his temple, seeing a thin slip of silver vapour go with it. This he deposited into the empty Pensieve. He then turned to Snape.

'You are not to view the contents of this Pensieve-'

'- until Dumbledore returns...yeah, you said,' said Harry tartly. 'Where is he anyway?'

'That is none of your-' Snape began to say, before changing his mind, 'well, suffice to say members of the Order are in danger. Like I have previously stated, an event of a serious nature has occurred that could well have blown the cover we have established for ourselves.'

'Does it involve Mr Weasley?' Harry asked urgently.

'Not directly,' said Snape icily, 'again, you seem to know much more than you ought to. It involves another of your little friends actually. Shame it isn't the full moon...he might be useful then.'

'Professor Lupin!' cried Harry desperately. 'What's happened to him?'

'That all depends on how successful Professor Dumbledore had been. But, apparently, seven or more Death Eaters were trying to reach him and the Auror, Shacklebolt. They were trying to take the other Auror, Tonks, to St Mungo's after she was attacked. They were ambushed on the way. With Moody off in Germany on a top secret mission our inner ranks are depleted.'

'Then why are you going?' asked Harry. 'Wont Voldemort know you're a spy?'

'It's a shame about that,' said Snape ruefully, 'our little reconnaissance operation there will have to end once I'm exposed. We have other irons in that fire, though. Why I am telling you this I don't know. I'm needed elsewhere.'

'I want to come,' said Harry at once.

'Don't be ridiculous, Potter,' laughed Snape quickly.

'I'm not, I want to come. I want to fight.'

'Out of the question.'

'Look, the Order is outnumbered, you said so yourself. I've fought Death Eaters before. I can do advanced spells...I've even duelled with Dumbledore. I can help.'

'Regardless,' said Snape, Harry feeling shocked that he didn't deny Harry's claims on his duelling skills, 'Professor Dumbledore would never approve.'

Harry had the feeling he was getting somewhere.

'Look, we'll lie. You can lie about me. Say I forced you, say I jumped you. That I tricked you or cursed you. Whatever. You'll like that.'

'I don't deny it causes me pleasure to put you down, Potter, but on this occasion-'

'You NEED me!' Harry cried. 'How are you getting there?'

'Portkey.'

'Right,' said Harry thinking fast, 'we'll say we argued, you tried to stop me but I dived and grabbed the portkey. We'll say it was my desire to show off and be the hero. I'll not deny it. Then you can have your moment of gloating over me...I might even die.'

The corner of Snape's mouth twitched and his eyes flashed; he liked that idea, Harry thought.

'I don't deny another hand, even yours, would be useful,' said Snape to himself. 'Very well. But stick to the story. It is likely that Dumbledore will expect you to try and come along anyway.'

Harry followed Snape over to a rusty cauldron and on the count of three they both placed a hand on the charred iron body. The pair of them, Snape and Harry, rushed towards the cauldron and Harry had a brief thought that this was probably the most unlikely unison he had ever entered into. The thought vanished with the Potions-master's

office in a rush of wind and a swirling of colour and Harry suddenly hit the hard stone floor of a derelict building.

'Severus! At last! Harry? Severus...what is he doing here?'

It was Lupin, his ragged robes singed and torn from the fight, a deep gash across his temple. All around them people were yelling curses and hexes, jinxes and spells as fires burned freely and smoke swam and sprinted around the damp, dark room. Harry saw Dumbledore look at him, an almost expectant grin flitting briefly across his face before he fired a arrow of fire from his wand towards targets outside on the street.

Harry looked out; they seemed to be in a deserted part of whatever town they were in. Many of the buildings nearby were as derelict as this one, and those that weren't were bland and boring. They were in some kind of dockland, as Harry could hear seagull song nearby and the smell of lightly rotted fish was wafting in with the chilly wind

'Harry! What happened? Why are you here?' said Lupin, diving for cover under the window.

'He duped me, Lupin,' explained Snape, 'I told him you were in trouble and he grabbed the portkey just as I did. I'll send him back now.'

'No,' said Dumbledore seriously, 'we could use Harry's skills. If he is willing of course.'

Harry felt such a swelling of pride that he thought he could have cried if the situation wasn't so serious. His chest puffed, he drew his wand and stood against the window frame, chancing another look at the Death Eaters outside. Voldemort wasn't one of them, Harry knew his frame instantly and he couldn't recognise it here. There were, as Snape had correctly said, seven Death Eaters, against the four of them, Harry, Remus Lupin, Dumbledore and Snape, inside the building.

'We aren't doing well,' Lupin said to Snape, 'Shacklebolt's down, don't know what hit him. They tried to take the stairs but we cant get clear

shots at them from here. This place won't last long; they're taking the thing down from the ground.'

'I'll go to the roof,' said Snape importantly and swept from the room, drawing his wand as he did.

'What can I do?' Harry asked Dumbledore.

'Just fire spells at anything that moves,' said Dumbledore casually, 'there are plenty of them down there so be careful.'

'Why don't we just take the portkey out of here?' Harry asked.

'That's the plan,' explained Lupin as he fired two spells quickly out of the window, 'problem is Tonks is in that building over there and we can't get to her. They don't know that but they've taken the pass across anyway.'

'We have to get to her, get her back over here, and take the portkey back to Hogwarts,' added Dumbledore casually, 'we're just short of ideas at the present time.'

Harry suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

'Does anyone have a broomstick?' he asked.

'No...' said Dumbledore cautiously, though his eyes flickered with hope.

'Does the portkey go back to Hogwarts?' Harry continued.

'Yes, why?'

'If I can go back I can get my Firebolt and fly over and get her.'

'No, Harry, I'm afraid it's too dan-

'Sir,' Harry interrupted, 'this is a war and don't tell me I'm too young to be involved. I AM involved, I'm at the heart of it for Merlin's sake. Let me help...please.'



'Very well,' said Dumbledore reluctantly, 'when you find your broom, tap it and mutter *'portus'* while thinking of this place. You will then need to take hold of both the cauldron and your broom at the same time. Otherwise one will be left behind. And Harry...do hurry wont you?'

Harry sprinted to the portkey and grabbed it as Dumbledore's spell made it into a portkey once more. Harry's feet barely stopped as he hit Snape's office floor and headed for the Quidditch pitch. He was in the entrance hall when he met Hermione.

'Harry! Where are you-'

'Sorry, Hermione, cant stop,' called Harry as he sailed past her. He didn't stop until he reached the place where the brooms were stored, unclipped his Firebolt and sprinted off again without closing the closet. He passed Hermione again in the Entrance Hall; she looked bemused and slightly hurt. Harry slowed down and jogged back to her.

'Cant stop again,' he said, 'Dumbledore, Lupin, Snape and me are fighting Death Eaters. Have to save Tonks.'

He gave her a little peck on the cheek and sprinted off again, ignoring the horrified look as she registered what he said. He also ignored her calling after him and the sounds of her footsteps echoing along the dungeon as she ran after him. Harry sped up and reached the office before she was even close.

'Portus!' cried Harry twice, pointing his wand at his broomstick and the cauldron. He grabbed it as Hermione skidded into Snape's office, before disappearing in rush of wind and colour.

'Got it!' Harry yelled happily, holding up his Firebolt to Dumbledore like it was some sort of trophy.

'Excellent!' he cried, 'now Harry, are you sure about this. Its very dangerous.'

'What isn't in my life?' Harry said stubbornly. 'I just want to do something useful.'

'Very well. Tonks is lying in a room at the top of that building opposite. Fly out and around the building, there's an open window at the back. Be very careful, Harry.'

The tone Dumbledore spoke in was full of dread but Harry didn't have time to doubt himself. He jogged to the door, yanked it open and sped down the staircase. It was concrete and cold, chipped in places and swimming it bits of litter and shards of wood that Harry couldn't understand were there. He reached the bottom to find the door had been locked shut.

'Alohamora!' Harry cried, but the door wouldn't open. 'Alohamora!' Harry yelled again, more desperately than before. Still nothing. 'Oh, come on! I have to get through!'

And with that Harry felt a tug, like a portkey and flew towards the door, passing right through the thick iron with a tickly breeze. Immediately the sounds of the battle erupted around him. He threw his leg over the broom and kicked off, just as a gruff voice yelled that 'some kid has just come out!' Harry soared through the air and had to swerve instantly to miss a curse aimed his way.

He leant down on his Firebolt and shot away like a bullet, the sounds of spells and curses blurring as wind rushed through his ears. He curled around the building and found the open window Dumbledore had mentioned. He swooped in, his heart flipping to see the room empty as he landed next to Tonks. Her hair was strawberry blonde and curly, but her face contorted in pain, fixed in place weirdly as she was unconscious.

Harry heaved her up onto his broom and climbed on behind her. He heard footsteps and angry yells coming from the only door in the room and knew that its rickety wooden frame wouldn't offer much in the way of safety.

'COLLOPORTUS!' Harry cried pointing his wand at the rickety door, allowing himself a chuckle as a heavy body slammed into the other side of the it, but it stayed shut.

Harry kicked off again, moving much slower now that he had a passenger on board. Harry was glad of the Firebolt's built in special

features as a broom that didn't handle so well would have made this trip a lot more difficult. Not for nothing, though, was the best broom money could buy and Harry managed to steer it out of the window and speed back around. He soared around the building, deciding it was easier to fly back into the room where Dumbledore was. He dodged a few stray curses and glided through the window, catching a brief glimpse of Snape on the roof, duelling with three masked attackers.

'Snape needs a hand,' Harry said as he landed, Dumbledore vanished in a swish of his cloak.

'Right, Harry,' said Lupin, 'take Tonks and Kingsley. I'll go and get the others.'

He muttered 'portus' with his wand aimed at Harry's broom and Harry took a hand each of Tonks and Kingsley and was about to place them on the broom when he heard a voice.

'Hello, Remus.'

It was Peter Pettigrew.

Harry was too late to stop the act of placing the hands on the broom but he was able to see something that chilled him to the bone. Peter had reached out and was inches away from placing a hand on Lupin's shoulder. It wasn't any hand, though, it was the special hand that Voldemort had given him. A hand of silver. And Harry knew what one metal could kill a werewolf.

'NOOOOOO!'

By the time he was able to yell, Harry was already on Snape's floor again, now facing Hermione who screamed in a mix of shock and horror. Harry reached around for his broomstick.

'Harry...what's happening? What are you-'

'Please move, Hermione,' said Harry desperately, 'I have to have my broomstick. I have to go back. Its Lupin.'

'Not till you explain,' said Hermione bossily, '*Accio Broom!*'

The broom flew to her and she Banished it and added a temporary sticking charm so that it clung to Snape's office ceiling.

'Hermione!' Harry bellowed so loudly that Hermione cowered away, making Harry feel guilty, 'What have you done? Lupin's dead now! Now I cant get back to him.'

'It wouldn't have made a difference,' said a deep, sorrowful voice behind him. Hermione looked over Harry's shoulder and let out a horrified squeal. Dumbledore was there, as was Snape, bleeding from several wounds. There, in Dumbledore's arms was the body of Remus Lupin.

He was dead.

## Chapter 27: Ghosts of Christmas Past

Harry sat down on the floor next to Hermione, who had fallen there in a crumpled sort of heap. She was weeping, shaking violently and making strange squeaky sounds. Harry wanted to comfort her, but the sight of Lupin's limp form made Harry just as weak as Hermione's little noises. All Harry could do was stare at Lupin, wondering vaguely how many more of the people close to him were going to die.

Dumbledore took Lupin's body from the room as Snape slumped down in his chair. He looked fatigued, his face pained from the wounds on his body. For the first time Harry thought Snape looked remorseful, though Harry was sure this wasn't the case.

'You may leave whenever you choose,' said Snape coldly, Harry taking it as meaning the end of their brief alliance. He hauled Hermione to her feet, cradling her as she buckled under the pressure of walking. She was still weeping, which Harry was glad of as he didn't much feel like talking.

Harry entered Gryffindor Tower to find Dumbledore sitting with Ron alone, the rest of the place empty. Ron wore a look of mingled shock, anger and sadness; Harry deduced that Dumbledore must have recounted the night's events to him. The Headmaster himself looked more strained and drawn than Harry had ever seen him. In the flickering of the firelight Harry thought Dumbledore looked old and frail, cutting the figure of a man tired and spent.

Harry and Hermione fell into chairs near the fire, neither saying a word. Harry glanced at Ron, who looked like he wanted to speak but just didn't know what to say. It was Dumbledore who spoke first.

'What happened to Remus Lupin is in no way your fault, Harry,' he said solemnly, 'you would not have been able to prevent it.'

'How do you know?' Harry spat as a spurt of anger jumped from the well inside.

'I arrived just as you left, catching the end of the portkey taking you away. Even if you had realised that Pettigrew was there, the fact that

he was so near to Remus meant that nobody would have been able to stop him.'

'So you've caught him then?' Hermione asked.

'Or killed him?' Harry asked hopefully.

'Neither, I'm afraid,' replied Dumbledore, that same aggravating solemnity in his voice.

'You mean he got away?' Harry cried, unable to believe his ears, 'Just like that? Escaped?'

'He Disapparated as soon as Remus went down,' said Dumbledore, 'there wasn't enough time for me to even throw my anti-Disapparation spell.'

'To hell with that!' said Harry, who found himself shouting now, 'Why didn't you just kill the scumbag?'

'Harry-'

'No, no, don't Harry me,' yelled Harry, 'I want an answer.'

'We apprehend the Death Eaters and they are tried in our courts. They are sent to Azkaban to be punished.'

'Sod Azkaban!' yelled Harry, 'That place is worthless without the Dementors. Even Mrs Figg could break out of there! What's the point?'

'They have to be punished for their crimes,' said Dumbledore with an annoyingly maddening air, 'death is an easy way out for many of them and is the forte of the enemy. If we sink to their level we become as bad as them. Besides, many aren't acting of their own free will.'

'Rubbish,' spat Harry standing up, 'just because they're too weak to resist the Imperius Curse doesn't mean it's a good enough excuse for them to kill people!'

‘Of course it doesn’t, Harry,’ smiled Hermione, in a blatant attempt to calm his temper; he ignored her.

‘Anyway, if killing is good enough for Voldemort then why isn’t it good enough for us?’

‘You want to be the same as Lord Voldemort?’ asked Dumbledore passively.

‘No...no, of course not...don’t be stupid!’ cried Harry, ‘But if they can kill us we should return the favour. Maybe old Barty Crouch had the right idea after all.’

‘He may well have done...’ said Dumbledore quietly.

‘Of course he didn’t!’ cried Hermione. ‘Two wrongs don’t make a right and a death for a death isn’t a fair trade. All it leaves is heartache and misery for the family and friends of all those who die.’

‘Those Death Eaters don’t give a toss about that! They didn’t when they killed Sirius, or Lupin or when they set that snake on your Dad-’

‘Don’t have a go at me,’ said Ron quickly. ‘I agree with you mate.’

‘And Voldemort sure didn’t care about it when he slaughtered my mum and dad in front of me did he! I’m sorry but these people don’t deserve life, in any form. Get them out of the way before they send more people the way of anyone close to me. Maybe they should just kill me, get it over with.’

‘Don’t say that, it isn’t funny,’ said Hermione, who suddenly looked extremely anxious, ‘not funny at all.’

‘Harry does of course have a point,’ said Dumbledore taking off his glasses and cleaning them on his robes, ‘enough people take that view. Its why Barty Crouch was so popular in the first place. But look what happened to him.’

‘But I haven’t got a deranged, psychotic son who wants revenge against me!’ cried Harry.

‘Before that Barty was going downhill,’ said Dumbledore patiently. ‘He was more paranoid and aggressive than Mad-Eye Moody, more obsessed with catching Dark wizards than anyone. He even mooted the idea of torturing them for information.’

‘I’d have backed him,’ said Harry sullenly.

‘Me too,’ added Ron, his eyes gleaming.

‘The idea of killing for the sake of it is the easy route out. It doesn’t make it the right thing to do.’

‘Wrong,’ said Harry. ‘I’m not sure how much of this you have grasped, sir, but we are at war. In war, people die. Its what happens.’

‘This isn’t a war like you’d understand it,’ said Dumbledore.

‘Oh really? Well, lets see. People die, I’ve seen two deaths in the last month, your own brother was one of them. You have fighting, I’ve been involved in two or three recently. Disagree if you want.’

‘I cannot, as you know,’ sighed Dumbledore.

‘Then what are you doing? The Order, The Ministry, the side of good? What are we doing.’

‘Waiting for the enemy to move and reacting.’

‘Not good enough,’ said Harry, now pacing. ‘Not good enough at all. Its like chess, except we are the losing team. They are moving all the right pieces and striking with devastating effect.’

‘This I cannot deny.’

‘Then it has to end,’ said Harry sternly. ‘They strike, and we back off. They sucker us in, and we retreat. They ambush us and our good people die. Well, no more! No more damn it! I’m done running. I’ve had enough of being scared. They have advanced too far. A line must be drawn...and it must be drawn here!’

And with that he stormed upstairs, leaving them all gawping at him.



The next few weeks were strained to say the least. Hermione seemed on tenterhooks with Harry most times, seemingly worried that he might explode with a tirade against anything she said. Ron was happier though, firmly agreeing with Harry on a more active resistance against Voldemort.

The problem was that since his outburst Harry had come to realise how short-sighted his sermon was. In the anger and grief over Lupin's death Harry had ranted and raved, venting some of the frustrations he felt over the lack of activity against the Dark Lord. In the heat of an argument it seemed a good idea to shout the odds to Dumbledore, to act like a General issuing battle orders.

But in the cold light of day, the reality of the situation really hit home. Harry wasn't involved, not really. Ultimately, he knew he would be at the heart of the conflict, the prophesied key to vanquishing Voldemort. But at the moment, the only thing he was, was a student of Hogwarts. Just like all the other students, except for his immense fame and important destiny. He had considered the fact that his celebrity should have died by now, owing to the fact that, yes, he had once defeated Voldemort, but he had come back, making the act ultimately useless. He was famous for an incident whose effects had been short term only, the false fame should have died with Voldemort's rebirth.

It was made apparent to Harry the reason for his continued fame one afternoon in the first week of February. It was a cold Saturday and most of the sixth-year Gryffindors were in the library looking up various texts to help them through the mountains of homework each teacher was setting them. Harry and Hermione were looking up the uses of powdered eagle talons for Potions with Neville, researching the calming and peace-inducing properties of certain mushroom varieties for Herbology.

'So, any news on You-Know-Who?' Neville asked to Harry's surprise.

'No, should I have?' Harry asked.

'Oh...no,' said Neville quickly, 'Its just...well, someone heard about you going off to fight Death Eaters. Somebody heard you arguing with

Dumbledore, said it sounded like you were fighting You-Know-Who properly.'

'Well, I'd like to be,' said Harry ruefully, ignoring Hermione's slightly desperate look.

'Well, I'm glad you are,' said Neville conversationally. 'As long as you are, we're all ok.'

'How d'you work that out?'

'Well... you're the only one he couldn't kill. If he still hasn't figured out how then he'll never have total control. You beat him once and I reckon you could do it again.'

So that was it, Harry thought. He'd been stupid not to register it. After all, only a few people knew why Voldemort's spell had failed to kill Harry first time round, and why it wouldn't stop him killing him if he tried again. He, Harry, knew this, but the general populous didn't. He was, never forget, the 'boy who lived'. He could hear Hermione in his mind telling him about all the books he was in. People still read those books...still thought he was unique...still thought he was some kind of saviour.

Harry felt guilty about the way he'd spoken to Dumbledore. He had been angry and upset, something the Headmaster was probably growing used to by now. However, Harry felt increasingly guilty about the way he acted, and deeply concerned by the way Dumbledore looked.

'He seemed old,' Harry said to Hermione one afternoon as they teamed up to try and lose less spectacularly to Ron at wizards chess, which, by the way, they were failing to do.

'Tired I'd say, not old,' said Ron.

'Like maybe he'd had enough,' said Hermione thoughtfully, 'not that I'd blame him.'

'Thanks for making me feel better, love!' smirked Harry.

‘No, I didn’t mean that!’ cried Hermione looked horrified.

‘I know, relax woman!’

‘Maybe you should go and talk to him,’ suggested Ron. ‘You know, just to clear the air.’

‘Yeah, I might. I’ve got Occlumency tomorrow, I’ll chat to him then.’

But when Harry was walking towards the Headmaster’s office he wondered just what he could say. He felt that, “sorry for acting like an immature git,” was a bit inappropriate, and that, “sorry for throwing my latest rattle out of my pram, can I have another please?” was a little too petulant for his own good.

So when Dumbledore invited Harry to have a seat so they could discuss the events it seemed like he was going to make the first move.

‘I’m sorry I’ve had to cancel our last two scheduled lessons,’ said Dumbledore. ‘And for asking you to take my Defence classes. I’ve been away you see.’

‘Oh? Doing anything important?’ Harry asked.

‘Drawing a line,’ said Dumbledore shrewdly.

Harry looked at the old man’s face, it shone of renewed vigour.

‘You see,’ continued Dumbledore, ‘I came to realise after our little discussion a few weeks ago that you were entirely right. Well...not entirely, but mostly. I will not agree that killing is the best way, but that is my opinion. My mistake here, you see, is being too selfish. I have let my own personal views influence what has been done. As Chief Warlock I have certain influences and have used these to restrict revenge attacks with the hope of staving off open war. Its only recently I have come to understand that open war is upon us, whether I like it or not.

‘I have realised that while I have been teaching Defence here I have become embroiled in Defence out there, in the real war. We have, as

you said, retreated too long and too far. There are those for whom redemption is beyond our reach. And there are those on our side willing and able to fight the evil fire with some of our own. And this we are doing.'

'What-'

'I cannot and shall not reveal these things to you. They are plans now in motion. Strikes will be made. Its time we made a few forward moves in this chess game. The faces we are losing are not random and meaningless to me. They are my friends too. If the enemy believes us to be weak, he is mistaken. If he wishes to draw us out, his wish will be granted. If he wants to fight, then we shall blow him out of the stars. Our line is drawn, Harry, and then enemy will *never* cross it.'

Harry felt himself shiver with the power of Dumbledore's words and his voice. It was serious and deadly and full of fire and threat. Harry knew without doubt that the time for action had arrived.

'Today we shall not learn Occlumency,' said Dumbledore. 'Today I want to take you somewhere, show you something that I think will be of interest to you.'

'What is it?'

'If you'll take this portkey with me I can show it to you.'

Harry placed a hand on the rusty kettle Dumbledore held out and the Headmaster muttered 'portus!' at it. Harry found himself hitting the floor of the Ministry of Magic. Dumbledore led the way across the empty reception area to the lifts. Dumbledore pressed the button and Harry felt the lift going down.

'Department of Mysteries,' said the cool female voice of the lift.

The Department of Mysteries, Harry thought. What could Dumbledore want to show him here? The Headmaster said nothing, though, as he marched across and through the black door into the circular room of more doors. Here, Harry could hear, as if it were an echo, the voice of himself and the other DA members from a year ago, desperately

trying to seal the doors from the Death Eaters. He remembered thinking Hermione had died...he shivered violently.

Dumbledore walked through a door and into a room of mist and shadows. It was icily cold and was making a eerie, low pitched hissing sound. Harry could see random, shapeless forms through the gloom wandering around.

‘What is this place?’ Harry whispered quietly.

‘It is a very interesting room,’ said Dumbledore casually, ‘where the wizards who work here study the greatest secret of life.’

‘Really? And what is that secret?’

‘Why...its death, Harry.’

‘What?’

‘The wizards who built this place found it was tuned in to psychic vibrations. In short, they could attract souls here.’

Harry froze, feeling frightened and thrilled about what eh expected to happen.

‘People who have passed over can be reached here for a short while. They can advise us and guide us, or just comfort us when they die. I’d like you to re-meet some people.’

Harry turned slowly around to find himself facing four figures, each one smoky but solid just like the figures that had emerged from his wand when he fought Voldemort after the Triwizard Tournament. The first Person was Sirius, his appearance clean and handsome as though he had never seen Azkaban. Next to him was Lupin, his robes looking brand new and his face full and joyous.

The next figure had left the others and walked to him, smiling at him, smoky tears running down her face. Harry gulped and managed to force out the words.

‘Hi...mum.’

## Chapter 28: The Room of Souls

The shadowy version of Lily Potter put her hands in front of her mouth and gave a small sob, reminding Harry strongly of Hermione's reaction every time Harry nearly lost his life. Harry's mother seemed too overcome by the whole situation and retreated to her husband, burying her head on his shoulder as his arm slipped around her neck. He, too, appeared so moved by what was going on that all he could do was smile at Harry, though he suspected smoky tears were behind those glasses.

Harry looked towards Sirius, then at Lupin, before finally turning to Dumbledore. He wore a look of expectation, as though he was to be thanked for bringing Harry to this bizarre, but fascinating place. Harry himself, though, was feeling a mixture of contained elation but disturbed by the images of the people before him. True, he would have given anything for the chance to see each and every one of these people again; but now he was faced with them, he wasn't sure how to react.

'Well, Harry,' said Dumbledore presently, 'what do you think?'

'What is this place?' Harry asked.

'This is known as the Room of Souls,' said Dumbledore, 'as I said before, the learned wizards who work here managed to enchant it to enhance its reception of psychic vibrations. It allows the souls of those passed to speak with those living. I thought it was time you met your parents.'

Harry turned nervously towards his ghostly parents as they, in turn, moved to face him. He slinked forward, wondering how it was that his feet felt like they had grown several sizes. Eventually, he found himself right in front of his parents, shaking slightly as he looked at them for the first time. Before he had time to register what their expressions were both his mother and father drew him into a hug.

It was a strange sensation; on the one hand the feeling was like being engulfed by liquid nitrogen, cold and breezy, but on the other he knew that his parents were embracing him and this gave Harry the kind of warmth he normally only felt whenever he was near Hermione. Harry

hadn't expected these ghostly, smoky versions of his parents to be solid either, not that he was complaining.

'Oh, Harry, Harry!' sobbed Harry's mother, 'I've waited so long for this! I've missed you so very much. Watching from where we are just isn't the same. Having to watch you deal with all the things you've had to after we were killed, and dealing with them alone...or mostly alone. I'll not forgive my sister for the way she has treated you. I knew she was heartless but never that bad. Every time she locked you in that cupboard I tried to convince your father to let me take out a temporary poltergeist license so I could haunt her for a bit. I'm so sorry Harry.'

'For what...mum?' said Harry, still finding it hard to adjust to using this word.

'For being so weak, for not being prepared. For leaving you in this world alone.'

'Now Lily,' said Harry's father, 'that's just ridiculous. We couldn't have been more prepared. But we were betrayed and our precautions were useless. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I'm the one who convinced you to use Peter as our Secret Keeper. If I hadn't...'

'Stop it, both of you,' said Harry sternly. 'There is only one person responsible for this...Lord Voldemort.'

Harry saw the smoky, blurry faces of his father and mother look at him in admiration, much the way Ron did when he thought Harry brave enough to speak Voldemort's name.

'I'm not afraid of saying his name,' said Harry as he recognized the look on his parent's faces.

'We know, son,' said his father, 'and we're proud of you for that.'

Harry thought his father had a strong and confident voice, matching his appearance and the type of person Harry been told he was. He could see how he and Sirius had been friends as they were very similar in the impression they gave out.

'As far as I'm concerned,' said Harry sharply, 'the only thing that Voldemort did was rob me of my parents. That doesn't qualify him for having his name spoken in fear. Not by my tongue anyway.'

Harry heard his mother give a Hermione-like sob and cover her face with her hands.

'And that's the right way to go,' said James cheerily, 'I was never afraid of old Voldemort and I'd hate to think of my boy fearing him. Especially being the chosen one, eh son?'

Harry felt oddly relaxed as his father spoke of the prophecy. Though his face was swirling with the greyish yellow mist he was made of, Harry knew his father was grinning. Making light of the fact that Harry's destiny was integral to the survival of good wizard-kind had the effect of settling the weight of it in Harry's mind. It made Harry even more sure that he and his father were very alike, and more remorseful that he wasn't around to face it with him.

'I don't think that Harry's destiny is anything to joke about, James,' said Lupin, speaking for the first time. 'How are you Harry?'

'Don't you know?' Harry asked.

'We can see what's going on, and we understand things a little more; we can feel vibrations and things that give us an idea of what's happening, both on a personal level and a more widespread one, but we never know anything for sure. Only true Seers can predict the future, and even then prophecies can be vague and the many meanings of be interpreted in different ways. We can guess what people are thinking and feeling but not much more than we could when we were alive. So, to answer the question, I don't know how you are. I mean, I can feel that your emotions are mixed but your individual thoughts and feelings are known to you alone.'

'Perhaps that isn't entirely true,' said James.

'Yes,' added Sirius, 'we can't forget Hermione Granger. She knows what you're thinking most of the time.'

Harry saw his father and Sirius exchange a significant look.



'But tell us how you feel, Harry,' said Lupin, diverting the conversation away from the potentially embarrassing one.

'Well,' Harry began not really sure what to say, 'I'm feeling a bit guilty, you know about not being able to get back and help you Professor, sir.'

'Please, call me Remus,' smiled Lupin, 'I haven't been your Professor for quite some time now.'

'I don't think I can get used to that,' grinned Harry shyly.

'Regardless,' said Lupin, 'you are not to feel responsible for what happened. There was nothing that could be done. Peter Disapparated right next to me and left at a hurry as soon as that silver hand took my life. It was a planned routine I'm sure. You're to worry about your safety, not blame yourself for my death and go hunting revenge.'

'But nothing seems to be happening, its frustrating,' Harry complained.

'Things are happening, its just a little more covert than you need to know.'

'Exactly,' said Lily sounding anxious, 'we know you want to prove yourself, that you want to help, but you must understand that you aren't the only one working against the dark side. The problem is they are just that...dark, and secretive.'

'Yes,' said Sirius, 'we aren't sure of their numbers, their resources, which creatures Voldemort has lured to his side. Until we do it is just too risky to go for all out open war. We could find ourselves horribly out numbered.'

'And if too many good wizards are killed in a straight fight, or an ambush, then who's left to defend the wizarding world as it is? That's why we have to be cautious, to be patient. I know its hard, you want to act but you can't. Just realise that it isn't as black and white as that.'

'Things are now in motion, though,' added Dumbledore, 'that will hopefully show us just what we are up against. I won't say any more, but things are happening. We have been dormant for too long.'

'But Dumbledore,' said Sirius pointedly, 'I know you didn't bring Harry here to talk shop. Let him have some time with his parents. The fight with Voldemort will still be waiting when you leave.'

'You are perfectly right, Sirius,' sighed Dumbledore, 'Harry...your parents await you!'

Harry walked to his parents, shivering slightly as his mother placed a chilly, smoky hand around his shoulders. They talked and talked, for what seemed like hours. Harry's parents were keen to talk to him out of school, his mother saying how he needed to try a little harder and his dad saying he needed to do less revision and play more Quidditch, a piece of advice his wife scowled at.

They talked about all the events of the last six years, from Harry facing Quirrell to the things going on at Hogwarts at this very moment. Harry thought his mother acted like a strange Hermione doppelganger to each piece of history that involved Harry getting hurt, Harry nearly getting hurt or Harry nearly losing life or limb. She gasped and cringed and hugged him tightly, even though she had seen all this happening she had never been able to comfort her son when he needed it.

'It's a good job you have such good friends,' said Lily, 'especially Hermione. We really like her, don't we James?'

'Oh yes, she's very nice Harry,' said James with a grin, 'we approve of her, just in case you were wondering.'

Harry's eyes went wide as the realisation of what his father could have meant hit him. Harry suddenly thought that if his parents could see everything he did then that would include everything with Hermione. His father seemed to read his thoughts.

'Don't worry about it, Harry,' smiled James, 'we close our eyes to some things you do. And I'm quite glad we do to be honest.'

They talked again for quite a while before Dumbledore said it was late and high time he took Harry back to school.

'Yes, you're right,' said James sadly, 'my energy is sapping fast too. I need to recharge. Just remember what we said Harry; keep an eye on your friend, Ron. He isn't out of the woods yet and he may have a part to play before this tale is over.'

'I'll keep an eye on him,' said Harry.

'And one more thing,' added James, 'make sure you flatter Ravenclaw in your next Quidditch match. That last game against Slytherin...it even hurt where we are!'

Harry gave his mother one last hug, shook hands with Sirius and Lupin before following Dumbledore out of the room. They were soon clinking back up the floors in the rickety elevator.

'You're very quiet Harry,' Dumbledore commented.

'Just thoughtful, sir,' replied Harry vaguely.

'About anything fun?' Dumbledore asked hopefully.

'Why did you take me there?' Harry asked, 'I'm glad you did, really glad. But, I'm just wondering why.'

'You've had so much heartache and loss in your life, and quiet a lot of it recently. I've been saving this trip until I felt you really couldn't do without it. Of course, I hadn't planned Sirius and Remus needing to be there, but that's life. Or death. I just get the impression that you needed to siphon off some stress, some of the pressure on your mind. Did you?'

'Yes,' said Harry enthusiastically, 'loads. I really wanted to see Professor Lupin and Sirius, they put my mind at rest on some things. Then there was my parents, it was good to finally meet them!'

Dumbledore appeared unsure as to how best to answer this comment from Harry and so remained silent. Harry, for his part, was too engaged with the thoughts of his parents, their dire warnings about

Ron still ringing in his ears. The silent blandness of the Ministry reception did nothing to distract his thoughts and it was only Dumbledore's insistence that Harry take the portkey back with him to Hogwarts that snapped him out of his reverie. He didn't much fancy sleeping like a bum on the side of the Fountain of Magical Brethren.

Dumbledore bade Harry a cheery goodnight at the foot of the spiral staircase leading to his office. The clang of the stone gargoyle slamming shut ricocheted into the dim gloom of the Hogwarts corridor, bringing home to Harry the fact that it was probably quite late. He strode along the deserted corridors, peering over a banister to find the Great Hall dark and empty. How long had he been gone?

The Fat Lady was asleep in her portrait but did open with a grumble when Harry gave the password, which had been changed to 'Hearts and Flowers' with the approaching advent of Valentine's Day. It was thoughts about this day, now just a fortnight away, that got Harry thinking first of all about the debacle that was last Valentine's Day, and the approaching one, which he was looking forward to spending with Hermione, but now equally dreading; it was embarrassing enough being all gushy and lovey-dovey, but now he knew his parents were watching over him. It was enough to drive a person mad with paranoia.

The common room was dark and quiet, embers bristling in the fireplace, their extremely dull light barely more illuminating than the moonbeam shining through the window. Harry saw a figure, only just silhouetted against the ember glow. It was Hermione, curled up fast asleep with a thick book curled up in her lap. Harry tip-toed over to her and lifted the heavy volume from her legs; she didn't even stir.

Harry looked at the title of the book, *'Everything You Need to Get Your Dream Man and What to do in Order to Keep Him.'* It was a strange book for her to be reading, hardly one that would ever make it onto the Hogwarts book lists. He supposed this was how he had been ensnared by her. She had placed page markers at various places in the book and Harry was about to flick through them, see if he'd been a victim of one of them when he heard Hermione cry frantically, *'Accio Book!'* She had awoken silently behind him and judging from

the look of shame and horror on her face had immediately wanted her manual back.

'Well, does any of that stuff work?' Harry grinned.

'What? Oh, well,' Hermione blushed furiously, evident even in the shadowy light, 'it got you didn't it?' She sounded tired and yawned widely. 'How did Occlumency go? You're very late.'

'I didn't have Occlumency,' said Harry as Hermione yawned like a cat, 'Dumbledore took me somewhere.'

'Really? Wh-Wh-Where?' said Hermione with her biggest yawn yet.

'I'll tell you in the morning. Go to bed, you look shattered.'

'Well, that's my lot isn't it?' said Hermione tiredly.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I spend half my life waiting for you. Not that I'm complaining. I mean, you always come to me in the end. It just means that every now and then when you go for night time jaunts I have to have a few sleepless nights waiting up for you. Even when I go to bed, I make sure I'm the last one to go up and I can't sleep until I hear that loud door of your dormitory slam. Then I know you're back. Cos its at the top of the tower I can hear it across in my dormitory. It's handy, really.'

'Well, I'm back safe and sound so you can go to bed now,' said Harry, who was feeling rather exhausted himself.

'Ok, night,' said Hermione as she gave Harry a tired and awkward peck on the cheek.

'Oh, by the way,' said Harry unable to resist, 'my mum and dad said they approve of you.'

'Huh?' said Hermione, looking as though sleep deprivation had affected her powers of comprehension.

'That's where Dumbledore took me, to see my mum and dad in this room at the Department of Mysteries. Goodnight.'

And Harry took off up the stairs before Hermione had a chance to haul him back.

Breakfast the next morning was an interesting affair as Hermione looking extremely apprehensive and tired, explaining to Harry that she hadn't slept a wink after what he'd said to her. This made him feel extremely guilty, but he forgot all that as he tore into a recount of the story of what had happened. Hermione looked a bit disturbed by the whole thing and only looked remotely happy when Harry said again that his parents liked her. She seemed obsessed with this piece of information.

'So, they actually said they approved of me?' she asked for the third time, by which time they were in Transfiguration turning fireflies into cigarette lighters. 'They think I'm good enough for you.'

'More or less,' said Harry evasively, taking cruel pleasure in teasing Hermione.

'Don't be so vague, Harry, I *need* to know!'

Yes, ok,' said Harry emphatically, feeling sorry for Hermione's tone of complete desperation, 'they said they really liked you and that they were glad we are together. My dad said I had good taste and my mum said she was glad I choose a girl who could look after me, who had my best interests at heart. And you know the old saying, mum knows best!'

Hermione was nothing short of exuberant for the rest of the day, becoming so inattentive that she set fire to Dean Thomas' schoolbag when her firefly went schizo. She was so energised that Snape even warned her that he would force feed her a quantity of the Draught of Peace if she didn't calm down and stop rabbiting away in his class. By lunch she was in a world of her own, the vouch given by Harry's parents having the effect of sending Hermione into a confidence level Harry had never seen in her. She took to shouting advice on homework down the table to people discussing it and being

impervious to their shouts back to keep to her own business and stop rubbing it in that she was so brainy.

It took several days for Hermione's high spirits to calm down, though she was still bouncing about as though on happy pills. It was just when Harry thought the worst was over, he had grown wary of Hermione's tendency to swing him into an embrace at the times he was least expecting it and nearly ripping his head off, that her exuberance returned in full force. Notices had gone up on the boards in all the common rooms of the four houses.

HOGSMEADE VALENTINES WEEKEND

FEBRUARY 14th AND 15th

PERMISSION SLIPS TO BE SIGNED BY HOUSE HEADS

EXISTING SLIPS CAN BE OBTAINED FROM MR FILCH FOR

RE-SIGNING. MUST BE SIGNED NO LATER THAN FEB 13TH

SIGNED: Prof. M. McGonagall

This sent Hermione into woman-on-a-mission mode. All she could talk about was what she was going to wear (Harry liked some of these ideas), what they were going to do (Harry had a few ideas of his own on this one) and where they were going to go (Harry had the sinking feeling Hermione might want to visit Madame Puddifoot's teashop for real this time).

'She's gone mad!' said Ron exasperatedly as Hermione nipped into the girls' bathroom and Ron and Harry loitered shiftily outside.

'I know,' sighed Harry, 'still, at least she's happy. You going with anyone?'

'Dunno,' said Ron evasively, 'I doubt it.'

Harry didn't believe him but didn't have much time to press him as a voice rang out down the corridor.

'Ron? Ron Weasley?'

It was Colin Creevey, still as mad as ever.

'Hiya Harry!' beamed Colin. 'You're Ron Weasley aren't you?'

'Last time I checked,' smirked Ron.

'Oh good,' said Colin, missing Ron's sarcasm, 'only I've got a message for you.'

'Ok...can I have it then?'

'Oh, yeah...sorry. Professor McGonagall sent me. They want you and Harry and Hermione Granger to go to the Hospital Wing immediately to see Dumbledore.'

'Why?' Ron asked impatiently.

'Not sure really. They just said it was important and urgent.'

'Anything else?' Harry asked sternly. 'Did they say anything else, Colin?'

'Yeah, yeah they did. Its your sister, Ginny.'

'What about her?'

'She's woken up.'



## Chapter 29: Ginny's Revelation

Ron chose not to wait for Hermione to finish in the loo before setting off for the hospital wing. He didn't get very far, however, deciding to stand and shout at Harry, who was in no way going to leave Hermione, from the end of the corridor. When she did emerge she was exposed to a torrent of frustrated calls from Ron and Harry explained the situation quietly as they ran long the corridor to meet him.

Together the three of them raced along the corridors and up several staircases until they reached the hospital wing, where both Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore stood waiting for them. Both wore grave looks of deadly seriousness, and these turned into oddly suspicious looks when they caught sight of Ron. Harry thought that whatever had accompanied Ginny's return to consciousness couldn't be very good news for her brother.

'Finally you're here!' Professor McGonagall said impatiently.

'Sorry,' said Ron out of breath, 'we had to wait for Hermione in the loo.'

'Don't blame her,' said Harry snappishly, 'it was Creevey's fault for taking so long to give us the message.'

'The blame for your tardiness is incredibly irrelevant,' said Dumbledore quietly, all turned to face him. 'The blame for something else is much more important. Wouldn't you agree, Professor McGonagall?'

There was no hiding in Dumbledore's voice the trace of accusation aimed at Professor McGonagall; he clearly thought it was inappropriate of her to bring up trifling things such as timekeeping in the face of whatever event his solemn look and tone referred to.

'What's happened? What's gone on?' said Ron fervently. 'What's happening with Ginny? Is she ok? Did she say who attacked her? Do-'

'Silence, if you please Mr Weasley,' said Dumbledore, the faintest of smiles flickering across his increasingly lined face. 'I see you have

been informed that your sister is indeed awake. To answer one of your questions, she is fine. At least, Madame Pomfrey can find no physical problems with her. Mentally and emotionally, however, we are not so sure. Only time will answer that question.'

'How so?' asked Hermione.

'Whatever it was that caused such a deep comatose state in Miss Weasley was a very powerful curse,' said Dumbledore thoughtfully. 'Physically it caused no damage, but it did send her into a deep unconscious state. The black mark faded of its own accord and when it did, Miss Weasley awoke. There is no telling what longer term damage it may have done, or whether this is all it was able to do.'

'Has Ginny got any idea who did this?' Ron asked earnestly.

'She has given us one name yes...'

'Well...who is it?'

'Bizarre as it sounds,' began Dumbledore ruefully, 'she claims that *you* are responsible, Mr Weasley.'

There was a pause, only a few moments in length, but that seemed to last for such a long time. Harry looked at Ron, seeing his expression turn from one of deepest concern to confusion, then to horror and finally landing on guilt. Harry glanced towards Hermione, who was wearing a look that seemed as though she had faked shock. Harry wanted to feel affronted with her, but he knew too much how she felt to be annoyed with her.

'Me?' said Ron eventually, his voice sounding distant and vague. 'She accused me?'

'By name,' said Dumbledore grimly.

Ron didn't know how to respond, judging by his look. His eyes betrayed confusion and bewilderment, the events clashing and contradicting in his mind. Harry knew that Ron was likely knowing that there was a good chance he was responsible for what had happened to Ginny, even if he couldn't remember it or didn't know how he had

managed a complex piece of sorcery. Indeed, Harry himself was curious to know; after all, Dumbledore had been stumped by the curse and Harry couldn't help but wonder how Ron had managed to perform it. Dumbledore was the greatest wizard of the age, and Ron was only just above Neville in terms of his own magical skills. It didn't add up.

'Can I see her?' Ron asked uncertainly, not sure whether he wanted to or not.

'She has expressly forbidden it, I'm afraid,' said Dumbledore with a sigh, 'she has, however, asked for Harry to be allowed to see her, if he will consent.'

Harry was shaken from his thoughts by Dumbledore's words. Ginny had asked for him? That was strange. Ron looked hopeful, obviously wanted Harry to check that she was ok and maybe try to explain that Ron wasn't acting of his own free will. Hermione looked very suspiciously at Harry; evidently, Harry surmised, Hermione hadn't forgotten Ginny's crush on Harry and choosing her for her sole confident seemed like a rouse to her. Harry smirked at her suggestively and she flushed with embarrassment when she realised Harry had learnt to read her feelings the way she could read his.

'Well, Potter?' asked Professor McGonagall pointedly. 'Do you want to see Miss Weasley or not?'

'What? Oh yeah, sorry Professor. Of course, shall I go in now?'

Professor McGonagall showed Harry into the hospital wing and he just managed to catch the Dumbledore speaking to Ron and Hermione, asking them to accompany him to his office so they could establish Ron's whereabouts at the time of the attack, based on Ginny's information.

Harry entered the ward with some degree of trepidation. He wasn't sure why Ginny would call him alone in to see her. If he took Hermione's female-jealous approach then Ginny asking for him would be like some sort of last request. Harry had a disturbing image of Ginny, her face riddled with some disgusting flesh-eating disease,

grabbing onto his arm and professing her undying love for him as her life ebbed away.

On the other hand, there was a chance she knew something about Ron's attack on her that she didn't want to confess to Dumbledore but would happily tell to Harry. It wouldn't be the first time; she had once been possessed by a young version of Lord Voldemort and hadn't told body about it, even when she knew something was going on with her. Either way, there was a reason that Harry was privy to Ginny's bedside and he was too curious to feel too apprehensive about her reasons.

Harry walked lightly towards Ginny's bed, now at the far end of the ward. It was very un-Hogwarts like, Harry thought, to find the Hospital Wing so empty. There was just such a chance for bizarre injuries here that the ward was usually a second home for some, Harry himself being one. Ginny was on her side, facing away from Harry and seemed to be sleeping. He pulled up a chair, the scraping echoing shrilly through the empty room and causing Ginny to turn around.

'Oh...hi, Harry,' she said vaguely.

'Sorry,' said Harry apologetically, 'I didn't mean to wake you.'

'I wasn't sleeping,' said Ginny. Harry noticed again how vague her voice was and how her eyes were dull and lifeless as they had been before.

'Professor Dumbledore said you wanted to see me,' asked Harry with a strange sort of formality, as if he were talking to a stranger.

'Did I?' Ginny said.

'I don't know...' Harry was starting to get confused and wary.

'I cant remember saying that. Sorry, Harry.'

'Oh...ok. Do you want me to stay with you?'

'If you like, I don't really...' Ginny's voice trailed off as if she'd suddenly remembered something that was more important than the conversation.

'Ginny are you sure you're feeling ok?'

'Harry...why am I in the Hospital Wing?'

'What?' Harry asked. 'You were attacked. Ron attacked you. You've been unconscious for ages. You told Dumbledore. Don't you remember?'

'No,' she replied conversationally. 'You can go if you want, I'm a bit tired.'

'Ok,' said Harry, looking wonderingly at Ginny's vacant expression. 'Hope you get better soon.'

Harry was barely a few steps away from Ginny's bed when she called out to him. Her voice was strained and desperate, as if she were fighting for breath and only just managing to speak. Harry turned and saw Ginny's face contorted in effort and going red at an alarming rate. Her eyes seemed one effort away from popping out of their sockets and Harry thought he could see the blood pumping through her cheeks.

'What is it? What's wrong?' Harry asked quickly. 'You don't look well. D'you want me to call Madame Pomfrey?'

'No, Harry!' hissed Ginny. 'I can't hold out much longer...have to...tell...you.'

'What? Tell me what?'

'The attack...my attacker...' Every word seemed to require a huge effort on Ginny's part.

'Ron? What about him?'

'No...it wasn't Ron,' said Ginny.

'But you said to Dumbledore...'

'No, I didn't. Well I did...but it wasn't really me. I've got to help Ron...got to stop it.'

'Stop what? Ginny...you aren't making any sense.' Harry was starting to get frustrated and desperate.

'It's the Imperius Curse. I cant fight it.'

'The Imperius Curse? I thought you were putting that on Ron,' said Harry.

'No, no...Ron was drinking some potion and was being made to do things by someone else but I made that person do it. The curse was put on me and had to put it on someone else so they'd feed Ron the potion.'

'So what happened?'

'I started getting used to it. Started fighting it. I could remember doing things...bad things. So when I started fighting back I tried to undo some of the stuff. That night you saw me Charming the wall of that empty classroom I was trying to break whatever I'd done to it before. I know that there's a way to use that room to go somewhere else, I just don't know where or how. I was Charming the wall on one side to lead somewhere safe but as I fought the curse the spell I had to do faded and I forgot it. I cant even remember if I finished it or what I did. All I know is that I did such a deep curse on the person I had to get under the Imperius Curse that she is almost programmed to do what I told her.'

'She?' asked Harry.

'Yeah, she attacked me when I tried to undo the curse. I think the person who cursed me got to her.'

'And who was that?'

'The Malfoys, Draco and his dad. Harry...I'm losing it...whatever curse hit me is still controlling my mind.'

‘Ginny...who did it? Who did you have to curse?’

‘It was Luna, Harry. Luna Lovegood.’

Harry gasped like a girl in a horror film and Ginny flipped back into her vacant mode.

‘Are you still here?’ she asked irritably. ‘I thought I told you to leave! I want some sleep.’

Harry dashed from the Hospital Wing, leaving Ginny muttering to herself about Crumpled Horned Snorkacks. He darted along the corridor, smashing a few disgruntled second-years into the portrait of Geraint the Gormless, who was less than hospitable to the collision. Harry sprinted away from the scene with his only thoughts bent on reaching Dumbledore’s office.

He rounded the last corner and met Ron and Hermione emerging from behind the stone gargoyle that guarded the steps to the office. Both looked as though they’d had a severe telling off and shared the same startled look as Harry tore towards them.

‘Hiya Harry,’ said Ron. ‘What’s-’

‘No time,’ panted Harry. ‘What did Dumbledore say? Did he expel you?’

‘No,’ said Ron gloomily, ‘but I’ll be under observation until he can establish where I was at the time. I think he’s going to talk to the creatures in the Forest cos I was searching for Ginny in there at the time. Unless I attacked her first of course.’

‘It wasn’t you!’ Harry panted. ‘Ginny told me.’

‘Who was it then?’ asked Hermione.

‘It was-’

‘Luna!’ cried Ron.

‘Yeah...how do you know?’

‘No,’ said Ron pointing over Harry’s shoulder, ‘*LUNA!*’

Harry swung around quickly.

‘Hi Harry,’ said Luna brightly.

‘Luna...what are you?’

But she had whipped out her wand before Harry had finished speaking and he could only remember her saying two more words.

‘*AVADA KEDAVRA!*’



## Chapter 30: From Water to War

The lake was quiet. A serene place where one could think, could reflect on life's troubles and traumas in peace and solitude. Chaos and stress were redundant at the lakeside where only the twittering of birds and the lapping of the cool water against the shore punctured the silence and the air. The water stretched from the land into the horizon, through a gap in the dense, dark trees surrounding the tiny bay.

Harry liked the lake. It was a nice break from the hustle and bustle of his ordinary life. He wasn't entirely sure where it was, nor indeed how he had arrived there. He was only slightly curious to understand how he had come to be sitting on a small boat bobbing happily on the shimmering water, connected to the jetty thirty or so yards away by length of thick rope. He did wonder vaguely who lived in the small log cabin on the shore, though he had a strange feeling that he knew what was inside.

If he was honest, though, he didn't really care. He was happy to sit on his boat and watch the waves wash gently on the mud bank shore, tanning in the warm sunshine and listening to the sounds of silence. He had no interest in going back to the land and was more interested in what lay beyond the gap in the trees and where the water led beyond the horizon.

But neither the land nor the horizon provided him with as much contentment as sitting on his boat. He had half a mind to paddle into the shore and look for a fishing rod, not that he knew how to fish. It was something he'd always fancied doing. The problem was that the thought of leaving the water even for a minute was one that filled him with terror, a sensation he just couldn't explain.

Had it been days? Had it even been weeks? Harry couldn't tell; all he knew was that being on his boat was the happiest he had been in a long time. Apart from being with Hermione, the thought of which caused him a slight pang. He missed her, there was little doubt about it. It was the only thing that made him slightly want to reel his boat towards the jetty and go to find her, not that he was sure where to start. He had a suspicion that she was in the log cabin sometimes; he

had seen her at the windows, white as a sheet and rubbing her eyes as if she had been weeping. Harry wondered why she was the only one who hadn't been to visit him.

For almost everyone else had, at one time or another. Oddly to Harry, they all seemed to just appear on the jetty, standing rigidly and vaguely like ghosts in chilly morning mist. Sometimes they just stood there, motionless while other times they were animated and threw their arms around like they were trying to get his attention. Not that they needed to, he could see them clear as day. He just had no interest in coming in.

All, to a man, shouted or called to him, though no sound came out, which Harry found slightly unusual. He could tell from the ways their mouths moved that they were calling his name but not once did he hear the words. Ron was his most frequent visitor, sometimes coming alone but on several occasions was accompanied by Ginny. When they jumped about, animatedly trying to provoke some kind of reaction from him their red hair looked like a flickering flame through the mist that seemed to descend whenever someone came to see him.

Dumbledore came a few times, too, often waving his wand as if trying to conjure him back to shore. Either that or he was trying to make the water disappear. Nothing worked, though, and Harry merely sat and watched them bemused but contented. Madame Pomfrey was frequently on the pier, strangely enough. She seemed able to send food and water out to him on his boat, though if truth be told he would have preferred a few chocolate frogs and a flagon of steaming Butterbeer if it was his choice. Professor McGonagall came once or twice as did, bizarre as it seemed, Professor Snape, who seemed that happiest of the lot that Harry was out at sea and not in his classroom.

But, most notable by her absence from the rickety wooden pier, was Hermione. She had dropped by on the first time Harry could remember being on the boat but he hadn't seen her since. He supposed she had her reasons; maybe whatever she was doing in the cabin was of great importance. But not seeing her hurt. It scared him too, almost as much as the thought of coming in from the lake.

He didn't know why, he couldn't explain it. It was as if he knew terror and fear lived on the land, whilst freedom reigned on the water. But he did miss Hermione...

Harry was trying hard to remember how he had come to be on the lake in the first place. He always had these moments of brain-racking whenever Dumbledore came to visit. As the Headmaster stood on the edge of the pier, chanting silently into the sky Harry had the urge to think, to remember. But he couldn't, not clearly anyway. Occasionally, things would come back to him. In particular a flash of dull green light, but he didn't know what caused it. Then he heard people screaming, notably Hermione, her piercing cries scything to the very core of his heart.

But he still couldn't remember getting on the boat, nor coming to whatever lovely place this was. This was the first time he'd really thought about these things without Dumbledore being there. For although he was happy Harry was starting to feel slightly unsettled. He could see Hermione at the cabin window again, pottering around inside. He wanted to speak to her. He decided to call out. To his amazement, no sound came out.

Harry was afraid. For the first time on the lake, he felt anxious. Why couldn't he speak? He decided to get up, but found his arms felt as heavy as iron and were not going to move. His legs were no help either, only his head seemed unaffected by whatever was happening to his body. He nodded his head frantically from side to side, an unwise choice as it made him very dizzy and hurt his neck in the process. Still, he had to try something.

As if sensing that Harry needed help, Dumbledore had appeared on the pier. He was calling to Harry, who could still hear nothing. Dumbledore scratched his head and then, despite the fair distance between them, Harry saw the Headmaster's face light up as if he had a plan. Dumbledore had withdrawn his wand and was swishing it through the air, writing words in the sky in a swirling golden handwriting.

*Harry, nod yes or no if you can hear my voice.*

Harry shook his head.

*Harry, its time for you to come back to us now. Would you like that?*

Harry read the swirly golden words as they dissipated into the mist and thought. He shook his head again, he was happier on the lake, despite his growing anxiety.

*Maybe the dragons in the water will change your mind.*

Harry's eyes shot to the water where the scaly black skin of what must have been fifty Norwegian Ridgebacks rippled just beneath the surface of the water, their evil eyes fixed upon Harry's boat, which he now recognised as small and flimsy and flammable. Panic now set in; he tried to move his arms, it was time to go to shore. But his arms were still too heavy and though he tried with all his might they wouldn't budge. He mouthed words of his predicament to Dumbledore who didn't respond. Fat lot of help you are, Harry thought. Then, like a ray of sunshine, salvation arrived.

It was Hermione, she was suddenly at Dumbledore's side looking nervous and afraid as she surveyed Harry's predicament. Then she spoke.

'Harry!' she said anxiously, 'Harry come back to us. Please.'

The sound of her voice was a powerful tool, the sound of speech giving Harry renewed hope as the dragons stirred beneath him. The boat was beginning to rock. Light collisions with the hull was causing the small craft to rock and bob dangerously on the water, its serenity replaced by violent waves and murky depths. Harry tried to move and felt his arms lighter, to heavy still to move but definitely not as heavy.

'Harry please,' moaned Hermione, 'we need you. I need you, you have to come in now. Please try.'

The desperation now seeping into Hermione's voice gave Harry another surge of determination and his arms moved slightly. They still felt heavy but they could be moved. Harry focused on Hermione's voice and flung himself towards the rope on the front of the boat. His body was stiff, his limbs felt as if they hadn't moved for ages. There was an ear-piercing almighty screech high above and

Harry looked up at the shadow of a Ridgeback, rearing up in the water and swinging its claws for him.

The fear coursing through Harry's veins made his arms come more to life. Hermione's terrified expression helped also as Harry grabbed hold of the rope and started to heave the boat towards the pier. Dumbledore and Hermione just stood on the jetty, Harry feeling slightly put out that neither would give him a hand.

Another splitting roar and Harry tugged hard on the rope, pulling the boat forward as another dragon smashed into the water, narrowly missing the end of the boat. There was barely a few metres to go, a few more pulls should do it. Harry yanked hard and the boat shuddered forwards. He tried again when...

**SMASH!**

The powerful wings of one of the dragons had crashed into the back of the boat, decimating it and forcing the rear of the boat under the water. Harry slipped back, his feet grazing the glass-like surface of the lake beneath. He scrambled up the rope and in good time too; a blaze of fire swept past him, missing his ankles by inches and dying in the cold water.

Harry found he had regained the strength in his arms and clambered up the rope and onto the jetty, hoping Dumbledore knew a good spell to subdue fifty dragons. But he was gone, and Hermione was gone with him. Harry heard her voice though, calling him from in the cabin. He hurried to it, the dragons were now on the land. He reached the door, the dragons were hurtling towards him. Harry turned the handle of the door, his heart awash with fear, and strode through as dragon flame lit up the woods around him.

Harry had barely a second to open his eyes and register being in a room that bore uncanny resemblance to the Hogwarts Hospital Wing before his face was engulfed by a rather expansive quantity of bushy hair, the texture of which he recognised but which also had a strange musky, pungent sort of smell that came with lack of washing. Harry could barely make out Hermione's words through her sobs and her quavering arms around his neck but he did suddenly realise he was lying down. How odd.

There were several other voice in the background, muffled by Hermione's hair and tearful sobs, but those of Snape and Dumbledore sliced through the rest. Madame Pomfrey's harsh tones scalded Hermione and she let go of her vice-like grip on Harry's neck. The Matron then forced some foul-tasting potion down Harry's throat, making him choke and spluttered as he struggled to swallow it. He looked up at Dumbledore who smiled back at him.

'Welcome back, Mr Potter,' Dumbledore beamed, 'we were starting to think you would never return to us.'

Harry saw Snape's lip curl, clearly his greatest wish hadn't been granted today.

'What am I doing here?' Harry asked.

'You don't remember?' said Hermione quietly, 'You don't remember being cursed?'

Harry thought back. Suddenly, the flashing green light, the screams, the witch.

'LUNA!' Harry yelled, 'Where is she? Have you got her?'

'Calm yourself, Harry,' said Dumbledore, 'don't worry about that now.'

'But she cursed me! She tried to kill me! Hang on...why didn't it work?'

'Because she doesn't have enough power,' replied Dumbledore, 'In order for the Unforgivable Curses to work properly you have to really mean them and have a level of power to make it happen. Luna Lovegood has neither. Though she did have a surprising enough amount of power to put you into a deep unconscious state.'

'For how long?' Harry asked apprehensively.

'Three weeks.'

'THREE WEEKS!'

'And two days,' added Hermione.

'But what...but why...' Harry couldn't find the right question.

'Your questions will all be answered when the time is right,' said Dumbledore sternly, 'but now we have to get you up and get you to safety.'

'What do you mean? We are in Hogwarts. There's no place safer.'

'Things have happened in your leave of absence, Potter,' snarled Snape, 'Pretty bad things.'

'Things to do with Hogwarts and Hogsmeade,' said Ron earnestly, who Harry hadn't noticed on his other side.

'Like what?'

'Well...' Hermione started, 'Its sort of gone crazy.'

'What do you mean crazy?' said Harry.

'Its part of Lord Voldemort's plan,' said Dumbledore.

'What plan!' yelled Harry, now starting to get frustrated.

'Civil War, Harry,' said Hermione quietly.

## Chapter 31: The Ultimate Betrayal

The words echoed around the Hospital Wing, which Harry noticed was dark and gloomy, something he hadn't realised before. He stared into the darkness as the impact of Hermione's words settled upon him. It had happened, his worst fear had finally been realised. The very thing he had been campaigning for, the action he was champing at the bit to be involved in had finally arrived. And the thought now terrified him.

For in his mind it was a great idea; the thought of glory and the chance to avenge all the innocent lives taken by Voldemort and his supporters. But it was dream glory, the kind that came in movies where the threat wasn't real and where the dead people came back to life when the director shouted 'cut'. But that wasn't the case here and as Harry tried to accept the reality his fear grew steadily.

Harry glanced past Hermione and Dumbledore to the door of the Hospital Wing where the faint sounds of distant voices trickled through the shadows. Mad-Eye Moody, wand drawn and magical eye spinning crazily, was stationed in the doorway. He turned to Dumbledore, his crooked face thrown into stark relief by the moonlight shining through the windows.

'Dumbledore,' growled Moody, 'You'd better hurry this up. Get Potter out of bed and let's go. Sounds like our secret's out.'

'Of course, Alastor,' said Dumbledore without the slightest trace of the urgency betrayed by Moody. 'Harry, if you'd like to get up and come with us. Make haste if you please, time is short.'

'Why is time short?' asked Harry as he rose gingerly from his bed.

'Here, put this on,' said Hermione forcing his Hogwarts robes roughly over his head.

'Ouch, Hermione!' said Harry. 'I can dress myself you know!'

Hermione looked slightly hurt but Harry turned to Dumbledore again.

'Why is time short, sir?' he asked again.



‘Because, Potter,’ snapped Snape, ‘the school is in the throes of this “civil war” as Miss Granger termed it. It would appear that the Dark Lord’s plans centre on Hogwarts, or at least it is of great importance to him. During your little snooze the school has become less of an educational institution and more of a battleground with those still inside entrenched in the conflict.’

‘When the signs were that Lord Voldemort had fixed his gaze on Hogwarts then we managed to get most of the students out. However, some of the older ones wanted to stay,’ said Dumbledore.

‘Why?’

‘Well, some had family or friends staying to help the Order and they couldn’t stand the thought of abandoning them. Some just didn’t like the idea of slipping out in the middle of a fight.’

‘So have all of the Order members come here?’ Harry asked.

‘Most of them,’ said Dumbledore. ‘We also have a few Aurors with us too, they will be handy, as well as some people who fancied joining the struggle.’

‘Like who?’

‘My entire family,’ said Ron enthusiastically. ‘Dad has to stay at work but Bill, Charlie, Fred and George are here.’

‘Dumbledore!’ hissed Moody impatiently from the doorway.

‘Yes, of course. Harry, are you ready?’ asked Dumbledore. Harry nodded as Hermione handed him his wand.

‘You’re going to need this,’ she said shakily. Harry noticed her robes were torn around her hip and she had several singe marks on one side of her face. Harry looked at all of them in turn; Moody was his usual mangled self but Ron looked like he had been cut on his forehead several days ago and hadn’t been able to heal the wound and even Snape had a deep cut on his ear. Dumbledore, it seemed, was the only one unharmed.

‘Why would I need my wand now?’ Harry asked as he took it from Hermione’s fingers.

‘The thing is Harry,’ interjected Dumbledore, ‘is that the school is a battleground and as such is divided into sections. The enemy recently took control of this section of the building and now control it. As far as we can tell they never entered the Hospital Wing, that’s probably why you are still alive.’

‘We’ve been trying to get to you for a couple of days,’ said Hermione, whose frightened look betrayed that she had been obsessed with this subject for some time. ‘We were so worried. We thought we might be too late, hat you might’ve....’

She didn’t seem able to form the words but a crash from outside the door prevented Harry saying or doing anything to console her.

‘They’re here!’ cried Moody, ‘wands out! Now!’

Moody fearlessly kicked open the door and started firing spells into the corridor with a speed and frequency that belied the age of the man. Dumbledore and Snape charged to the front as Ron and Hermione formed a barrier in front of Harry.

‘What are you two playing at?’ Harry cried.

‘You’re too important, Harry,’ said Hermione steely.

‘Yeah,’ added Ron. ‘In the end, you’re the one that has to defeat You-Know-Who, so if we have to fall to keep you alive that’s what we’re going to do.’

Harry wanted to tell Ron to shut up and stop talking rubbish but Dumbledore beckoned them to follow him out of the Hospital Wing and talking ceased. When they reached the corridor the reality of what was happening hit home for Harry. The stone walls were bedecked with scorch marks and piles of rubble dotted the passage at irregular intervals. Several of the brackets that housed the torches, which were not alight, had been smashed from their hangings and some littered the floor while others hung precariously from the crumbling brick around them, waiting to join the debris in the corridor.

There were the echoes of shouting above and below, and in all directions, the unmistakable sounds of multiple spells discharging and the whole place reeked with the nauseating odour of gasoline.

Harry followed Hermione and Ron as they darted along the corridor. For some reason Harry had bent down while running as if to avoid the dangers that he was sure were lurking in the Hogwarts shadows. They turned a corner, Harry heard Moody yell like a pirate and fire a spell at something. A dull thud reverberated along the gloom to Harry's ears as Moody proudly proclaimed that he had 'got one'.

They hurried along this new corridor, Harry unable to work out where they were in the dark. Moody was leading the way with his wand lit and his wooden leg clunking so loudly that any stealth tactic was completely useless. The wand light was bright but the shadows on the periphery were dangerous and daunting. The sound of footsteps behind caused all the group to stop and Harry felt a hand push him hard against the wall and Hermione resumed her position of bodyguard in front of him, pinning him to the stone. At any other time...Harry thought mischievously...

'Don't move, Potter,' snarled Snape, evidently it was his arm that had pushed him into the wall.

'Shift it, Snape,' growled Moody as his wand cast a light down the dark corridor.

'Don't shoot, Mad-Eye. Its us!'

The unmistakable voice of Fred Weasley sliced through the light as he and his brother George hurried up to the group. Their wands were now also alight.

'Hey there Harry,' said George, 'you two couldn't have waited till you were alone could you?'

'Yeah,' added Fred turning his light on Harry and Hermione, 'its just we're all a bit busy at the moment and could do without being sick for the time being.'

'Ah, the beauty of young love,' said George reminiscently.

‘Yes,’ added Fred in the same dreamy tone, ‘do you remember it George?’

‘No. You?’

‘Nope. Too disgusting for my tastes.’

‘If you’ve quite finished,’ hissed Moody, ‘maybe you haven’t noticed we’re still behind enemy lines and this nonsense chatter is endangering our lives.’

‘Then lead the way Mad-Eye,’ said Fred jovially.

‘Oh yes, and do get a move on,’ added George conversationally, ‘we’ve just got away from six or seven of the “enemy” and they’re right on our tails. Probably following your clunk just like we did.’

‘Right,’ said Moody commandingly, ‘rearrange. Snape, you and Dumbledore to the back, me and the twins up front, Potter you stay in the middle. Right, move now.’

The group shuffled around and Harry felt himself shunted in between Snape and Hermione as the party began to hurry forwards again. They twisted and turned down blind, dark corridors following Moody’s clunking wooden leg. Harry caught sight of a few things he recognised and knew they were heading towards Gryffindor Tower. There was the staircase, just up ahead but instead of racing towards it Moody called the group to a halt.

‘Right, the stairs are up there and they’re guarded. We’ve got our people there but the scum are around, in force, too. There’s only one way to get up there, just run and pray. We’ll do it in two’s with me and little Weasley first. C’mon, laddie.’

Moody edged forward, his head swinging from left to right, assessing the scene. He then took Ron by the scruff of the neck and thrust him forward. They were a few strides out when the first few spells flew across the cavernous hall that housed the stairs. Moody pushed Ron forwards and he ran up the stairs, dodging a few jets of purple sparks. Moody stumbled after Ron, aiming a few spells towards the enemy as well as a few choice words.

Ron stopped inside the alcove that led to Gryffindor Tower and began shooting spells into the random shadows on the far side of the hall. Moody joined him and Harry noticed a few jets of silver sparks from two people he didn't know alongside Moody. Harry watched as the Weasley twins scampered across the landing and up the stairs, firing spells towards the enemy as if they had water pistols in a playground game. Harry knew he was next and Dumbledore ushered he and Hermione to the end of the corridor.

'Right, Harry,' said Dumbledore, the slightest hint of apprehension in his voice, 'when I say, run up to the others. Don't look back, just go. Ready? NOW!'

Harry raced blindly into the hall, Hermione just behind him. He was engulfed by a crossfire of many coloured jets of lights as spells whizzed passed him from what seemed like every angle. Harry felt his legs like jelly as he ran across, ducking and dodging the streams of light and hoping that nobody was hit. He looked up and could see the Weasleys mouthing for him to make it, though he could barely hear them. The whole situation had become surreal and slow-motioned and Harry closed his eyes. It was as a bad mistake as he trod on the hem of his robes, stumbled and fell to the floor.

Harry looked back and saw Hermione stop to avoid tripping herself, but as she did a blast shot from a wand in the shadows and she was hit, toppling ominously towards the side of the staircase. Harry watched in horror, knowing full well what was going to happen but being powerless to stop it. Hermione hit the edge of the stairs in slow-motion and edged, almost gracefully over the stone bannister and fell into the gloom below.

Harry tried to cry out but was grabbed by a pair of strong hands from behind and dragged upwards. He looked into the face of Kingsley Shacklebolt, lined and frowning as he dragged him to safety. Harry stared into the darkness where Hermione had fallen and made to go back there, as if he could catch her before she fell.

'Harry, get back here,' shouted Moody.

'She's gone,' said Kingsley bleakly.

But she wasn't gone. She couldn't be. Harry looked hopelessly at Dumbledore as he and Snape strode almost nonchalantly across the staircase and joined them in the alcove leading to Gryffindor Tower.

'Sir!' said Harry desperately.

'There's no time, Harry,' said Dumbledore seriously, 'all may not be lost. I managed to cushion Miss Granger's landing but she is on the ground floor and that's no-mans land. Its one of the most dangerous places in the school.'

'I'll go,' said Harry without thinking.

'I'll come with you,' said Ron and, with warnings to be careful from Dumbledore, both raced back across the stairs and headed towards the main stairway that led directly into the Entrance Hall on the ground floor.

Harry stopped halfway down the staircase and pulled Ron against the wall into the shadows. For on the ground floor two figures were lurking by the door, silhouetted by the light from outside. Hermione was hidden in the shadows cast by the high stone banister of the main staircase and Harry could just about make her out. He and Ron edged down the stairs slowly and silently, Harry feeling his heart beating loud and painfully beneath his ribs.

They stopped on the last step, waiting with held breath for the two door guards to turn away before they scuttled around the side and to Hermione. She was out cold and as Harry cupped her head in his hands he felt a lump blooming on the back of it. He and Ron threw one of Hermione's arms over each of their shoulders and pulled her limp form back to the foot of the stairs.

Again they waited, patiently and silently as the two wizards at the main doors stood and looked into the gloom inside the high room that was the Entrance Hall. Harry felt his mouth dry and itchy as he waited again in the shadows. The two men peered into the empty hall as if aware that they weren't the only people there. Eventually, though, they decided it was empty and finally turned away.

Harry surged forward, taking Ron a little by surprise and the pair of them hauled Hermione up the stairs. They were nearly at the top when Harry heard voices from the bottom; they had been spotted. The two angry voices sailed past them as the two door guards hurtled up the stairs in pursuit. Harry urged Ron forwards and they hurried along the corridor until they came to a fork.

'Left or right?' Harry asked desperately.

'How about in here?' Ron said motioning to an empty classroom just behind them. Harry thought this was a strange choice but followed Ron as they eased into the room and closed the door silently behind them. They slumped Hermione down against a desk against one wall and waited with their wands drawn.

The door creaked open slowly and Harry saw a wand tip edge through the crack and fire a spell at Ron that he couldn't hear. It didn't seem to have much of an effect and Harry was glad that whoever shot it must have gotten the spell wrong.

'Are you ok?' Harry asked Ron.

'Sorry, Harry,' said Ron mournfully.

'For what?' Harry asked suspiciously, slightly taken aback by Ron's tone. He looked into his eyes and suddenly saw them fog over with a lifeless black film. He had a shot of expectancy as to what would happen next, but couldn't react to it.

'For this, Harry,' said Ron answering Harry's question before turning his wand on him. 'Expelliarmus!'

Harry felt the force of the spell hit him in the ribs and he soared through the air and into the wall as the door opened. His wand span away and was caught by Ron, who pocketed it and turned to the door. The person who walked through it was one of the last people Harry wanted to see.

'Hello,' said a dreamy voice. It was Luna.

'You!' Harry spat.

‘Me,’ said Luna lightly. ‘I’d love to chat, Harry, but Ronald and I have work to do. Ronald, do the honours.’

Ron nodded obediently and conjured ropes from thin air and bound them tightly around Harry, who wondered where Ron had acquired the power and knowledge to perform such a spell.

‘Voldemort too cowardly to come and kill me himself is he?’ Harry snarled, trying to buy time as much as anything.

‘Why would he want to do that?’ Luna asked pleasantly. ‘It isn’t time for that yet. He wants to hurt you first. It gives the Dark Lord great pleasure to see you squirm.’

‘Then why doesn’t he come here to hurt me himself? Why does he have to use tricks and games to get to me? Too scared of Dumbledore is he?’

Harry saw Luna shudder at the sound of Dumbledore’s name, the way most people in the magical world did when someone mentioned Voldemort.

‘You are so two-dimensional, Harry,’ said Luna vaguely. ‘There are more ways to hurt someone than with physical pain. The Dark Lord may not hold much stock of emotions himself but he realises that others do and that this allows them to be exploited, just like this.’

Harry was sure his heart stopped. He suddenly realised what was going on, what was going to happen but was again helpless to stop it.

‘No! Leave her alone,’ Harry cried as Luna strode towards Hermione. ‘Ron! Wake up! You can’t let her do this. You have to fight it!’

‘Sorry, Harry,’ was all Ron could say, he sounded like a recording.

‘I’m tired of listening to you,’ said Luna in a sing song voice as she aimed a curse at Harry’s face. Next thing he knew was that he was gagged, struggling to breathe through his nose. ‘That’s better. Now Ron, help me please.’



Ron and Luna hauled Hermione to her feet and dragged her to the far wall and Harry suddenly clicked as to where they were. This was the room in which he'd seen Ginny disappear through a wall, though it was the one opposite the one to which Luna and Ron were now facing.

'Say goodbye to Hermione,' said Luna happily as she pointed her wand at the wall, 'Metaportus!'

The wall glowed a dull blue for a second before Luna turned to Ron.

'Your use is now done,' she said, 'but I like you too much to hurt you that badly, though I know my Lord will punish me for it. Stupefy!'

Ron flew back and through the wall Ginny and fallen through. Luna looked mildly surprised.

'Hmm, that's odd. Bye Harry,' she said before disappearing through the wall as the classroom door was blasted open. It was Fred and George.

'Harry! Where's Ron?' said Fred as George ripped off Harry's binds.

'Dunno,' said Harry gloomily.

'And Hermione?'

'Through the wall,' said Harry pointing.

Fred strode up to the wall. It was solid again but his hand vanished through the wall opposite.

'Did Ron go through this one?' Fred asked. Harry nodded.

'Well then,' said George getting to his feet, 'lets find the little traitor.'

Harry got up and followed them heartlessly to the wall. On the count of three they all fell through the cold stone, Harry feeling his heart had died. Hermione was gone forever.

## Chapter 32: Return to House of Death and Evil

Harry felt as though he'd walked through a shower of ice as he followed Fred and George through the mysterious wall. The only thing he'd ever felt before that even remotely resembled the sensation was when he passed through a wall of flame on the way to finding the Philosophers' Stone six years ago. And Hermione had just left him on that occasion too...

The feeling of ice sped away from Harry's body as he passed through the wall and he found himself staring at a familiar sight. They were in the Gryffindor Common Room. So, Harry thought, this was how Ginny had gotten here so quickly when she went through the wall all those months ago; she'd come directly here. It all made sense, not that it was much consolation now.

'Where is he?' said Fred angrily.

Harry hadn't even thought to look but, now that he did, he registered that the common room was deserted, meaning Ron wasn't in sight. And, Harry thought, he wasn't surprised. For although he knew it was the common room it couldn't have looked much different. The handsome tapestries that hung from all walls were singed in the places that they hadn't shrivelled up due to being set alight. The ones most intact had gaping holes and rips of all descriptions all through them.

Aside from the hangings, the chairs were overturned, the table at which Harry, Ron and Hermione had done so much late night homework was smashed and broken in one corner, the surround to the fireplace was cracked and crumbling and the window had been smashed in allowing for strong breeze to pour into the room.

'What happened here?' said Harry, the first emotion coming to his heart since Hermione had disappeared through the wall.

'Those damned Slytherin bar stewards,' said George through gritted teeth. 'We heard that as soon as the first fighting broke out in Hogsmeade they mobilised and came straight here.'

'The poor Fat Lady,' said Fred, still angrily, 'They massacred her portrait and no-one has been able to find her.'

'Not that anyone's looked,' added George.

'How did this all start?' asked Harry, 'What changed from me getting attacked by Luna to waking up today?'

'That's where it began,' said Fred sitting down on the couch, the only thing seemingly untouched by the fight. 'Luna vanished after she attacked you. Her Imperious Curse on Ginny wore off and she told Dumbledore and the Order about what had happened.'

'Obviously Dumbledore knew that You-Know-Who must have been planning a strike and it failed,' said George taking over, 'he got everyone together up here, the Aurors, the Order, anyone who wanted to help-'

'-but it wasn't a great idea-'

'Cos *he* got wind of it-'

'-thought that Dumbledore was cooking up an assault plan-'

'-so launched one of his own.'

'At Hogwarts?' asked Harry. 'That seems a bit weird.'

'Well, it would be,' said Fred, 'that's why he attacked Hogsmeade.'

'Hogsmeade?' said Harry, 'What's the use in that?'

'I thought you were supposed to be bright, Harry?' said George.

'Must be more like us than we thought,' added Fred thoughtfully.

'We always thought you were the brother we should have had,' said George.

'Are you sure you weren't adopted-'

'We'll have to ask mum-'

'ANYWAY,' said Harry loudly, 'tell me why he attacked Hogsmeade. I don't understand.'

'Oh, yeah, right,' said Fred. 'See, Harry, Hogsmeade is the only all-wizard village in Britain. It makes sense to attack there because its packed full of magical people.'

'And not just the residents,' said George, 'Hogsmeade gets loads of visitors and not just from Britain. It hosts international functions and gatherings and all sorts.'

'So old Voldie had plenty of potential recruits-'

'-or victims-'

'Quite right, George, or victims for the Imperious Curse or blackmail or whatever. Its harder to root out wizards in a mixed community-'

'-but up in Hogsmeade he could pick and choose because they're all magic.'

'And its close to Hogwarts and Dumbledore-'

'The one person You-Know-Who would need to eliminate to have a clear run at power.'

'Well, not the *only* person, eh Harry?' said Fred, a wry smile creeping across his face.

'Yeah, he still has to get to you, Harry. His great nemesis,' added George.

'We should get you a nickname-'

'And a costume-'

'And a cape, you have to have a cape-'

'And a mask?-'

'Made of rubber, maybe?'

'Fred! George! Please,' said Harry feeling exasperated, 'I'm not a super hero.'

'You'll always be our hero,' said Fred lovingly.

'Shut up,' said Harry, trying hard to suppress a grin.

'At least you can still smile,' said George. 'We haven't done much smiling for weeks.'

'Anyway, enough gassing. Where is that dopey brother of ours?' said Fred.

They started to look around, thinking maybe Ron had gone into hiding amongst the debris. They overturned tables and chairs, kicked aside fallen objects and piles of mess but Ron was not hiding under any of them. They checked all the dormitories but he wasn't there either.

'I wonder if we can get up the girls' stairs now?' said Fred mischievously before trying to run up the stairs.

'Clearly not,' said George as Fred slid back down to the floor.

'You'd have thought the castle would relax the rules considering we are at war-'

'-and could use a little distraction-'

'-but obviously not. Doesn't miss a trick does it?'

'He must have left the common room,' said Harry, 'wonder what happened to the others. Weren't they supposed to be heading in this direction.'

'They went off in another direction when fighting erupted over by the Transfiguration classrooms. Dumbledore sent us to find you,' said George.

'But we had to duel with those two outside the classroom,' added Fred.

'Where's the safest place to start looking for Ron?' said Harry.

'Dunno,' said Fred scratching his chin, 'Switzerland, maybe?'

'Be serious,' said Harry sternly, 'we have to find him. He might know where that other wall leads and I have to find Hermione.'

'Ok, ok,' said George thinking, 'Nowhere is safe really. But the area around the library, the entrance hall and the North Tower are all changing hands all the time. He would likely go to one of them.'

'Don't we have any parts of the castle?' said Harry desperately.

'Well, we have the Forest,' said Fred, 'And Trelawney's Divination room-'

'-and the East wing by the Charms rooms, but that's it.'

'Right,' said Harry, 'we'll start at the library.'

'Ok, lead the way.'

'Maybe he's feeling remorse and wants to go the library to pacify his guilt.'

'Yeah, it was Hermione's home from home after all-'

'-and he wants to cherish her memory-'

'She isn't dead yet!' said Harry passionately.

'Yeah...yeah, of course. Sorry, Harry.'

They didn't speak much more as they trotted along the corridor. Only the echo of their footsteps broke the droning silence, the distant sounds of battle barely penetrating the air as they drifted across the castle. The end of the corridor was reached without incident and Harry turned the corner. He stepped and felt his foot hit nothing but air. Slowly, he lost his balance and began to fall. Two pairs of hands grabbed him powerfully and pulled him back.

'Wanna be careful there, Harry,' grinned Fred.

'It's always a good idea to check the floor before you turn a blind corner,' added George.'

'Can't be sure it hasn't been blasted away.'

Harry looked down and sure enough there was a huge hole in the floor beneath his feet that led to the corridor below. Harry could have fitted through quite comfortably if he had been laying down, such was the width of the gap, but there was a small ledge of the floor remaining on one side. They decided to cross one by one, edging slowly across the mini-ravine as rubble crumbled away beneath their feet and crackled as it showered down onto the floor below.

From this point on Harry was painfully cautious of all hidden dangers. The shadows he feared so much did indeed hide many threatening surprises. Holes in the floor, falling shards of stone from damaged ceilings, damaged walls whose chipped stone was jagged enough to rip away flesh from the bones of unsuspecting young wizards who walked against them. But none of this, not one thing, compared to what they met outside Dumbledore's office.

They'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, hardly surprising as Hogwarts was difficult enough to negotiate during the day let alone in the dark of night with fear and apprehension crawling through your skin. Whatever the reason Harry, Fred and George took one turn and found themselves facing the stone gargoyle that guarded the Headmaster's office. The only problem was that the statue was prostrate and broken in half at the end of the corridor leading up to the office. This wasn't a good sign.

Thinking that maybe the Headmaster had gone back to his office Harry led Fred and George slowly through the debris-laden hallway towards the smashed staircase which led to Dumbledore's private chambers. Harry should have known that it was too quiet and too easy to be believable. If he had thought this then maybe he would have been prepared for what came next.

A club, a thick rugged club, swung out from a shadowy alcove and smashed into George Weasley's face. He flew back along the corridor, blood streaming from a large gash and his nose becoming one of Ron's pet hates; it was now most definitely off centre. Fred,

much to Harry's surprise, didn't run to his brother's aid, instead pushing Harry to safety and drawing his wand. Harry whipped his own out as quick as a flash and surveyed the situation. His Adam's apple suddenly felt like a small rock in his tensed throat.

For astride the corridor were four goblins. And these weren't the half-nice, respectable goblins that Harry had seen working at Gringotts bank. They weren't even the slightly more mean looking goblins that had harassed Ludo Bagman for the money he owed them after the Quidditch World Cup. No, these were the kind of goblins that lived in dark fairy books, the kind that ate children and haunted the dreams of those they didn't.

They were short and stocky, shoulders wider than a small car and forearms the size of really large hams. Their skin was scaly and greasy and a sort of slime hung from the corners of their mouths and gave off the stale smell of rotten eggs. Each carried the same chunky club and had pointed teeth inside oversized snouts. They looked like the kind of people who'd steal your lunch money from you.

Harry wasn't sure what spells would work on goblins, it wasn't the sort of thing he'd given much thought to. Fred didn't seem to care very much and began firing spells at them. Harry tried the Stunning spell, causing one goblin to wobble, but it just made him more angry. He stormed at Harry, smashing away with his club at the statue Harry had hidden behind.

'Fred!' bellowed Harry over the howls of the goblins, 'we need to combine our spells! Fire a stunner at this one attacking me first and we'll see if it works.'

'Ok,' Fred called back as he fired a conjunctivitis curse at one goblin, who began to shriek in pain and rubbed its eyes forcefully. Fred and Harry both fired simultaneous stunning spells at the goblin attacking Harry. It stopped instantly, tottered uncertainly on its feet before falling to the ground.

'Do each one in turn!' Harry yelled to Fred and together they fired spells at the remaining attackers. They had taken out two and only one remained, but he seemed wise to the situation. As Harry fired his



spell the goblin dived for Fred, deflecting his spell with his club and landing on him.

'Harry, think of something fast will you?' called Fred as he dodged crushing blows sent his way by the goblin.

In the distance Harry heard a swooning song, the song of a phoenix. He had a flash of the sorting hat flying his way in chamber under the school. He had an idea.

'Fred, hold off the goblin, I'll be right back,' said Harry.

'Yeah sure,' shouted Fred sarcastically, 'I'll have a coffee with milk and two sugars while you're at it!'

Harry ignored Fred and instead raced towards the staircase leading up to Dumbledore's office. He noticed one of the goblins begin to stir and knew time was short. He sped up the stairs taking several in one bound and reached the top quickly. The door was locked but, amazingly, as he prepared to try the Alohamora charm the door opened of its own accord.

Harry tore inside and looked frantically around the beautiful office. All the portraits were empty but the office itself looked unharmed. Harry look frantically around; he could see all kinds of spindly instruments and useless trinkets but not what he wanted.

'Oh...where is it!' Harry yelled, his frustration getting out of hand.

As if by command, a door to a large cupboard opened at the end of the room. Harry shot across to it, yanked it open and punched the air in delight. He had found what he was looking for.

Harry leapt back down the stairs, his prize in his hand and was soon back in the battle. Fred was barely alive, the goblin had beaten him to the ground and his face was blooming two black eyes and gushing blood from several deep wounds. Harry raced to it and plunged the object in his hands through the back of the goblin. It cried out, it wailed, it wobbled on its feet before Harry pushed it to one side and it fell to the floor, stone dead.

'What's that!' said Fred, his impressed tone evident through his broken jaw.

'The sword of Godric Gryffindor,' said Harry proudly.

'Behind you, Harry' came a yell from down the corridor.

Harry swung around as Fred saluted his brother George's return to consciousness. Harry luckily ducked under the flailing club of the goblin and in one swift movement, that surprised even himself, he withdrew the gleaming silver sword from the dead goblin and thrust it into the neck of the one attacking him. It too fell to the ground.

'Best take care of the other two,' said George motioning at the two remaining goblins who were starting to stir.

'Can I do one?' asked Fred. Harry handed over the sword and Fred decapitated one goblin more than was necessary. George followed suit to the remaining one.

'That was fun,' said George handing back the sword to Harry, who tucked it into his belt next to his leg.

'Which is the best way to the library?' asked Harry.

'This way,' said Fred and they took off down another corridor.

They walked down several corridors and short flights of stairs before the library came into view. There were several figures silhouetted against light streaming in from the windows opposite. There were four in all, again Harry found himself outnumbered.

'I don't want a one-on-one,' moaned Harry.

'Us neither,' chimed Fred and George together.

'Stunners on three?' asked Harry, Fred and George nodded.

Harry counted to three and both he and the twins fired stunning spell after stunning spell at the figures outside the door. All went down. Harry led the way up to the fallen figures.

'I knew it,' said Harry triumphantly, 'Crabbe, Goyle and that weasel Zabini.'

'Don't know this guy,' said George kicked a Slytherin Harry didn't recognise.

'We cant leave them here,' said Fred, 'What if they wake up and go for help?'

'I've got an idea,' said Harry. 'Pull them against this wall.'

Together they lugged the four Slytherins into the wall opposite the library and stepped back. Harry pointed his wand at them.

'*Serpensortia!*' he cried. Instantly, a long, powerful cobra flew out of the end of his wand and landed near the Slytherins. Fred and George jumped back.

'Harry!' hissed Fred, 'What are you doing?'

'Trust me,' said Harry before turning to the snake, 'Guard them. Do not let them escape.'

The snake hissed back.

'Oh yeah!' cried George, 'You speak Parseltongue! What did you say to it?'

'Told it to guard them. C'mon, lets get inside.'

Harry pushed open the door to the library and stepped inside. It was a mess; it was dark inside but what Harry could make out in the moonlight was that the place had been decimated. Books and shelves alike lay askew and destroyed with piles of both all over the place. The tables used for work had been broken in bits and the chairs were nowhere to be seen.

Harry walked among the rows of collapsed book shelves, unable to stop the flow of fond memories of times spent here. At the time the place had been a millstone to Harry as he looked up things for his homework, or searched for Nicholas Flamel or tried to find ways to

survive in the Triwizard Tournament. Now all that seemed gone, belonging to a past Harry was finding harder and harder to remember. Then the door opened.

Harry shot round and somewhere in the gloom the skidding sound of two pairs of feet told him Fred and George had done the same. Harry stopped, his wand shaking in his hand. Was it a friend or a foe? Harry felt his heart beat fast; with the goblins he hadn't had much time to think but now that he did it scared him to bits. Then...

*clunk clunk*

It was Moody's wooden leg. Harry raced to the doorway and sure enough there was Moody along with Snape and Dumbledore and...

'Ron!' called the twins together.

'I believe you're looking for this,' said Dumbledore genially.

'Yeah, well done for finding the little traitor,' said Fred angrily.

'Now, now, Mr Weasley,' said Dumbledore seriously, 'Your brother wasn't acting of his own free will. He feels bad enough without you three hating him for it.'

'What about Hermione?' said Harry loudly. 'Where could she be?'

'I don't know that,' said Dumbledore, 'And neither does young Mr Weasley here.'

'Then that's it?' said Harry, anger rising in his chest, 'we just let her go?'

'No, of course not,' said Dumbledore and, for the first time Harry could remember, the Headmaster had responded to Harry's angry tone with one of his own. Harry found it scary.

'Th-then what do we do?' Harry stuttered.

'I'm afraid it is something only you can do, Harry,' said Dumbledore sorrowfully. Harry saw Ron's eyes widen with yet more guilt and anxiety.

'What do I have to do?' said Harry, not caring much about what the task would entail.

'You have to use a portkey, Harry.'

'A Portkey? You have a portkey to where she is?' Harry cried.

'Not yet,' said Dumbledore vaguely.

'I don't understand,' said Harry.

'You see,' continued Dumbledore, 'Portkey's are usually created to link places that are a great distance away. But, it is possible, though tricky, to create a portkey that takes you to *someone* rather than *somewhere*. It needs a strong emotional link, one that not even a good friend, such as Mr Weasley, could create. Take this kettle, Harry.'

Harry look a battered old kettle from Dumbledore, whose hand was trembling ever so slightly.

'When you are ready, concentrate on Miss Granger. You have to summon all your emotion, all your love for her, all the anger for those trying to hurt her. Focus it, then channel it through your wand and at the kettle. If it works the portkey should transport you to her location.'

'Shall I do it now?'

'If you are ready.'

Harry felt ready. Ron, surprisingly, placed a hand on the kettle.

'What are you doing?' asked Harry sharply.

'I'm coming with you,' said Ron.

'No you're not,' spat Harry.

'I've betrayed you and Hermione, I just want to help-'

'No,' said Harry firmly, 'you've done enough damage already. Let go of the kettle.'

'I'm sorry, Harry,' mumbled Ron stupidly, 'I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I'm sorry, I hope you can forgive me.'

'Look,' snapped Harry, 'If I can get to Hermione and save her from Voldemort, cos I'm sure he has her...oh don't wince and don't look so surprised! Grow up, Ron! If I can save her then she can decide if we're going to forgive you. If I cant and she dies, I guarantee I'll make sure you follow her wherever she has gone.'

Ron goggled at Harry, who noticed Fred and George do the same. Harry ignored them and followed Dumbledore's advice. He concentrated, hard and long, focused his energy as much as he could, then pointed his wand at the kettle.

'PORTUS!' he cried.

The kettle glowed blue for a second then Harry felt the tug behind his navel, the rush of wind and colour as he was pulled forward, the Weasley's red hair blurring into the background.

Harry hit hard on the floor. He stood up and leapt behind nearby tree for cover. Wherever he was, Hermione was not in sight. Harry was in a grove of some sort, though it could be a garden. It was night time, only the lights of a village flickered down a sloping hill a short way away. Harry looked up the hill and saw a house. It was a grand old manor, ivy sprawled across one face and the building looked as though it may once have been handsome, but had fallen into disrepair through lack of care.

Harry knew the house but couldn't think from where. A light flickered in an upstairs bedroom as though a fire had been lit there. Harry walked up the winding path to the back door. He was about to place a hand on the door handle when he had the urge to look around. There, shrouded in a gloom created by falling fog Harry could make out a small set of headstones in what looked like a family cemetery. A cemetery...Harry froze. He knew where he was. Two years ago he'd

visited this place several times, mostly in dreams but one time as a prisoner. Harry knew where he was.

He'd come back...back to the Riddle House.

### Chapter 33: The Second Person He Fears

Harry's confidence began to fade as he opened the back door to the Riddle House. It creaked a little more than Harry would have liked, the ringing pitch sounding a death knell, an bad omen of the situation. Harry crossed the threshold and took in the dark room. It had a dank smell of damp and rust, a musty odour that hung still in the stagnant air and tickled the nose of those not used to its pungency.

Harry crossed the kitchen as silently as he could, sliding his feet over the tiled floor. The kitchen table, bland and unset, stood lonely in the centre of the room. Spectral and skeletal, Harry wondered what it would have been like for Tom Riddle's parents to sit there with him; whether they had any idea that their son was to become the worlds most evil sorcerer. Wondering whether this was the table at which they'd been found dead...

The thought of death did little for Harry's state of mind. His hair wasn't so much standing on end as trying to pull itself out of the pores in Harry's skin. He hoped he wouldn't have to duel, not only because Voldemort would beat him with tremendous ease but that his hands were shaking so much that there wouldn't be much point even trying to fire an accurate spell.

The silence wasn't helping matters. The droning was ringing loud in his ears, obscuring his efforts to pick up any trace of sound, to try and be prepared for what was lurking in wait for him. Harry was also pinning his ears to the air to try and pick up any sound of Hermione, the prospect of her still being alive would give him the top up shot of determination and courage he so desperately needed.

The door to the kitchen stood ajar. Harry eased it open and stepped through into a handsome, high-ceilinged hallway. The colour scheme was deep red and light pink, giving a very genial air to the place, totally in contrast to what Harry was feeling and completely removed from the attitude of its current owner. The pink carpet had taken on an unusual grey tint due to the build up of several inches of dust. Harry wasn't complaining; on the contrary, he was quite glad as it muffled the sound of his shivering footsteps.



Not that this seemed very important now. After all, Harry knew he'd have to face up to Hermione's captors eventually, so hiding from them seemed a fruitless exercise. He was pretty confident also that he had about as much chance as sneaking up on Voldemort as Dudley did of playing Quidditch for England. The thought of Dudley on a broomstick brought a smile to Harry's face and lightened his mood.

Harry walked silently up the stairs, listening to the distant popping and crackling of a fire up ahead. Still he could hear no voices, no footsteps and, more importantly, no screams. Harry had half expected Voldemort to torture Hermione. At least, Harry gulped, if she was dead, it would have been quick. Harry shivered involuntarily. Such morbid thoughts were unlikely to get him anywhere. And there was Dudley being chased by a Bludger. There, that's better.

Harry reached the landing, his tongue engorged and painful in his mouth, his teeth chattering and his neck so tense his shoulders were hurting. It was a cold night but Harry felt a bead of sweat escape from his hairline, trickle down past his eye and fall off at his cheek. The door stood ahead of him, bland and boring, but leading the way to the source of the firelight. He had to go through.

Harry placed a hand against the door and pushed it open. Nothing. He breathed uncomfortably as he took a few steps into the room. The wall on his right obscured his view of the wider room but the insubstantial flickering of the firelight was growing stronger. A few more steps...then Harry froze. There was someone there.

It was Hermione.

She stood, still and upright, her face fixed with a look of total terror. Her eyes widened as Harry drew into her sight and she looked more terrified than before. Her whole body was rigid, as if someone had flicked a body-bind curse on her. She shook her head slightly and Harry knew that she was telling him not to go further. But that was not the best plan.

For seeing Hermione move had sent a wave a relief so powerful crashing over Harry that he actual stumbled as his knees gave way. As he righted himself, though, his determination and his resolve

returned and he was prepared to face whatever it was that was holding Hermione. It too, was prepared for him.

'Come on in, Harry, join the party.'

The high-pitched, soulless voice stabbed through the cold air and chilled it even more. Harry stepped forward with leaden legs, turning the corner and taking in the whole scene. The room was totally bare. The floorboards had been swept clear of the dust covering the rest of the house and a large pile of it rested in one shadowy corner. A mouldy, tatty hearthrug lay in front of a small fire which had been lit in the charred grate and covered by a metal mesh whose edges were rusted and had several dangerous looking spikes protruding from them. In the centre of the room was a large, dirty armchair. On this chair, wand drawn, sat Voldemort.

'Welcome, Harry,' said the cold voice again, 'I thought you'd never get up here. Never used stairs before, have we? Or did the fear get the better of you?'

'I don't fear you,' Harry lied.

'That is your mistake,' cackled Voldemort. 'Those who choose not to fear me are either extremely brave or extremely foolish. Though both meet the same end.'

'Where's Luna?' asked Harry, casting around for a change of subject whilst trying to formulate a plan. It had been a bold and brave idea to come straight for Hermione but now he was here thinking of a plan beforehand seemed like it would have been a fruitful course of action.

'Oh her?' said Voldemort casually, 'I have no use for her now. I believe she is back at Hogwarts joining in the festivities.'

'Festivities?' asked Harry.

'Why yes, Harry. The festivities for the coming of chaos, marking the beginning of my reign. Fitting don't you think?'

'Not really,' said Harry.

Voldemort seemed keen to talk and Harry thought it must be because he wanted to prolong the fear for Harry and Hermione, and to elongate the pleasure of the occasion for himself. Harry had no idea how to get out of this situation. It was hopeless.

'Anyway, Harry,' continued Voldemort, 'I have no time or patience for this little chat. I want to get it over with. So, shall we duel or shall I kill this Mudblood, Muggle filth first?'

Harry felt a surge from deep within his gut, something more potent than anything he'd experienced before. He'd felt something similar several times before. It was the feeling Dumbledore said came whenever anyone tried to hurt Hermione. The thing that would stop anyone hurting her in Harry's presence.

Could it be? Harry thought fast. Was it possible? Could this be it? *The power that he knows not?* Harry wasn't sure but he had to find out.

'What did you call her?' Harry asked viciously.

'That's a better tone,' sniped Voldemort. 'I called her a Mudblood, Muggle piece of Filth. I could have added ugly, deluded, pathetic and with ridiculous hair. But these things mean little to Lord Voldemort.'

Harry bubbled. He concentrated, much in the same way as he had when created the portkey. The anger was making him shake as he added all thoughts of the Dursleys, Malfoy and Dolores Umbridge to his mind.

'Come now, Harry,' said Voldemort icily, 'Shall I give you a taste of what's in store for you? Come Wormtail, you can watch this.'

Harry started. Wormtail? Here?

'Yes, master,' said a quavering voice from the shadows. Peter Pettigrew emerged and stood near Voldemort. Harry noticed his wand was out.

'Bind Potter for Lord Voldemort, Wormtail.'

Wormtail flicked his wand and Harry felt his body come over all cold and he realised he could no longer move. At the same time, Hermione came undone from the bind she had previously been in.

'Harry! Why did you come! Why!' she cried.

But Harry couldn't move his head, just his eyes. But he didn't, he just stared at Hermione, trying to make her understand. But she couldn't.

Because she was now up in the air and her body was being twisted and contorted as Voldemort held her in the Cruciatus Curse. Hermione's spine curved and arced and Harry knew that a fraction more and he would hear the sickening snap as it broke. But it didn't. Instead, Voldemort decided to twist Hermione, turning her bones painfully around as she hung in mid air. The high pitched screams were cutting to every tiny bit of Harry's body and mind. But something was happening.

The anger brewing inside him was doing something. It was moving. Slowly, and rather painfully, it was creeping through his veins towards his right hand, in which he still held his wand. Harry noticed then that he had regained some of his movement. Whatever charm Wormtail had on him, Harry was beating it. And Pettigrew knew it.

'Master! Master! I cannot hold him. He is resisting.'

'Be stronger Wormtail, you pathetic excuse for a wizard!' yelled Voldemort. 'Hold him or face my wrath.'

'Let her go or face mine.'

Harry had regained the power of speech and so much more. His entire body was tingling with something that Harry couldn't explain. His skin was shivering and his head was vibrating through it. But there was power there and Harry had to harness it.

'Face your wrath!' laughed Voldemort, his high-pitch superseding Hermione's screams.

'Let me go,' said Harry dangerously.

'Wormtail, take care of him,' ordered Voldemort.

But before Wormtail could do anything Harry flicked his wand in Wormtail's direction, without even looking at him. The next sound Harry heard was a loud thud as Wormtail smashed into the wall on the other side of the room.

Though his eyes didn't look remotely afraid, Lord Voldemort did survey Harry with a look that resembled intrigue.

'That was a man's action,' said Voldemort sounding mildly surprised and impressed.

'Then let us fight like men,' said Harry, though his voice didn't sound like it was coming from his mouth.

'Very well,' said Voldemort dropping Hermione mercilessly to the ground, 'I will let you have your moment. Time for revenge, Harry?'

Voldemort's sarcastic laughter really annoyed Harry at this moment. The Dark Lord was doing his head in, which Harry thought was a strange sensation to have at this moment.

'Its not so much revenge I'm after,' said Harry thoughtfully, 'more like a reckoning.'

'Then lets reckon,' said Voldemort.

'No!' cried Harry as Hermione got to her feet and pointed her wand at Voldemort, 'this is between me and him. Don't do anything.'

'How noble,' cackled Voldemort, 'don't you think you could use some help, Harry?'

'Nope,' said Harry calmly.

'Very well.'

Harry was caught by surprise and the power of Voldemort's spell was so powerful that it tossed Harry across the room in a second. It sent a

gust of wind through the room so great that Harry, whilst flying through the air, saw Hermione totter against its force.

'I hope,' said Voldemort icily, 'that you haven't underestimated me, Harry.'

Harry didn't respond. He flicked his wand at Voldemort and a sprinkle of white dust flew towards him at great speed. Voldemort conjured a translucent shield of light to deflect it. The shield did its job but it rocked Voldemort back and he stumbled away from it. He looked up at Harry and for the first time Harry saw it. In Voldemort's eyes. It wasn't fear. It wasn't wariness. It was respect.

'What was that?' asked Voldemort. What sort of charm was that?

'The sort of which you know not,' said Harry cryptically.

Voldemort flicked his wand at Harry and an arrow of pure fire shot his way. Harry swished his wand and an avalanche of snow engulfed the arrow, both vanishing before they hit the floor. Then Voldemort shot a blast of light at the dust in the corner, which rose up and flew towards Harry. He tried to think how best to repel it as Hermione fired a Stunning spell across the room. It hit the dust blanket but instead of helping it simply cut it in two, doubling the danger.

Harry darted around the room, diving away from the blankets as they tried to cover him, all to the sound of Voldemort's cackling laugh. The blankets had him cornered and as they were coming together Voldemort struck again. It was the Cruciatus Curse.

Harry felt his limbs as if they were being torn from one another. His bones were being pulled apart as though made of play dough and his skin was burning all over. Then it stopped and Harry fell to the floor.

'What is that magic you have?' screamed Voldemort as Harry looked up at him, hunched on the floor. 'Perhaps I should take out your girlfriend first, maybe its her?'

'No!' cried Harry. 'Don't do that! I'll surrender. I'll let you finish me. Just don't hurt her in front of me.'

Harry had thought of a plan, he just hoped it would work.

'You will stand aside and let it end?'

'Yes.'

'Where's the fun in that?'

'I didn't think Lord Voldemort would need to have fun. This would be your crowning moment. All those years of embarrassment; all those sniggering voices behind your back, laughing at you for being unable to kill a mere baby. I will let you wipe that clean, you will finally send me to my parents.'

Harry's argument seemed to hold water with Voldemort, something he'd counted on. He had gambled on Voldemort choosing what was easy rather than what was right. He had chosen to listen to Harry's easy option, rather than ignore him and do the right thing by taking Harry out.

'I want just one thing,' added Harry.

'I knew there would be something,' smirked Voldemort. 'What makes you think I should give you anything?'

'You'll like this,' said Harry.

'Go on,' said Voldemort intrigued.

'All I want is the chance to say goodbye to Hermione,' said Harry. 'I just want one last time with her. Think of it, think how much more satisfying it would be to kill me if I know you are forcing her to watch you torture me. Think of how much more painful it will be for me. All I want is one minute.'

'Very well,' said Voldemort. 'She is no use to me anyway. I shall let her go after your little farewell.'

Harry knew he was lying but he had the moment he wanted. He walked up to Hermione, whose wand was still pointing at Voldemort.

She looked scared and confused and Harry smiled lightly at her, hoping to relax her. It had the effect of making her look confused.

'Hermione,' Harry said loudly, casting a glance at Voldemort, 'this is our last moment together. I'm sorry I wasn't good enough. I'm sorry I didn't have the power to save you. I'm really sorry.'

Voldemort laughed heartily in the background but Harry ignored him, instead focusing on making forced faces at Hermione, hoping to communicate that he had a plan. She seemed to have understood as her expression changed. She now looked questioningly at him. There was nothing for it. He would have to speak to her.

'I just want to say goodbye,' said Harry in a false emotional voice, and leaned in to hug her, his head on the shoulder furthest away from Voldemort. 'Don't move your arm. Go along with what I do. If you feel anything weird happening to you just ignore it. Trust me,' whispered Harry.

He moved away from Hermione and looked into her eyes. Voldemort was positively cheering in the background.

'Are you finished yet?' he asked.

'Just one more thing,' said Harry, his right hand moving up to Hermione's and forcing their wands together. His other hand went to Hermione's shoulder and he stared deeply into her eyes. 'I love you, Hermione.'

Voldemort howled with high-pitched laughter as Harry placed a powerful kiss on Hermione's lips, all the time focusing on his emotions. Like Dumbledore said, he concentrated all his emotions; all his anger, all his love, all his hate. And he could feel it. Building up somewhere in the pit of his stomach, he could feel it bubbling and moving but more rapidly this time. It was coursing through his veins, burning and scratching at his skin as it shot towards his right hand...and his wand.

He opened his eyes and saw Hermione wide-eyed herself. He could see the pain in her eyes and feel her hand vibrating as the substance flowing through him reached his hand. He put as much pressure on



Hermione's lips as he could, his body shivering and quavering down low that was little to do with the tingling magic running through him. Then it happened.

It felt like an explosion of heated pleasure. For although it burned awfully in his fingers the feeling sent waves of happiness coursing through his body from his wand. He heard a loud cry and a thud and glanced to his right, not breaking the kiss with Hermione. He saw Voldemort, face contorted in agony, pinned against the wall by a vicious stream of pure white light.

Harry knew he couldn't break the kiss or the stream of energy, so focused on kissing Hermione. A second later and Harry heard a fizzing pop to his right and knew that Voldemort had Disapparated. Still, he didn't break the kiss. It didn't matter, Harry didn't care that Voldemort had escaped. He had saved Hermione.

It was she who broke the kiss, collapsing onto Harry into a powerful hug and bursting into tears.

'Its ok now,' said Harry consolingly, 'its over.'

'H-how, w-what did you do?' sobbed Hermione.

'I'm not really sure,' said Harry, 'its something Dumbledore said. That prophecy said I'd have a power that Voldemort did not. That power could only be truly powerful with you. I had to be close to you, part of you to really make it work. I had to be with you because that power is love.'

Hermione let out a howl and sobbed even harder onto Harry's shoulder who suddenly realised where they were.

'C'mon Hermione,' he said seriously, 'lets get out of here.'

'How?'

'I've got a portkey out in the garden. C'mon.'

Harry led Hermione down the stairs and out of the house, noting that Wormtail had also escaped. They used the portkey and landed back in the library, now deserted but still devastated.

'Oh no!' exclaimed Hermione desperately, 'how could they do this to the library?'

The defeat of Voldemort at the hands of Harry wrought a change in his plans. He must have realised he had a new problem, ordering his followers to withdraw from Hogwarts to regroup and rethink. It may also have had something to do with the small army of Aurors that made their way to the school. Or the rumours of his defeat at the hands of Harry that may have made them wary enough to flee.

When the school was secured and the damage surveyed Dumbledore decided it was best to send the remaining students home, relieving them of their entrenched warrior status. The journey home on the Hogwarts express was strained. Ron sat very quietly in the carriage, several seats away from Harry on the other side of the compartment. Hermione had decided to give Ron a chance to redeem himself as soon as she could think of something to give him the opportunity. Harry had agreed with it but not without complaint.

He sat on the train, nursing his wounds that were still healing after Madame Pomfrey's makeshift remedies. Hermione was looking painfully at him but both their thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the compartment door. In walked Luna, head high and airy as though nothing had happened of interest in her life.

'Hello,' she said dreamily.

'Out,' said Hermione sternly, so much so that even Ron looked up, surprised.

'What?' said Luna, who sounded rather affronted.

'You aren't welcome here,' snapped Hermione.

'I don't think that's for you to decide,' said Luna haughtily.

'Oh, I think it is,' said Hermione forcefully, 'and I want you to leave.'

'Well, Ronald wants me here.'

'Who cares what he thinks!' cried Hermione, who was now bawling into the face of Luna, who seemed unmoved.

'I do, and if you don't get out of my face I'll...'

Luna made to draw out her wand and Hermione did something Harry had only seen once before. And it shocked him then too. She bawled up a fist and thumped Luna extremely hard in the mouth. She fell down clutching her jaw as her eyes welled up. She stumbled to get up.

'Shall I help you?' cried Hermione who strode over and kicked Luna in the backside several times until she was out of the door and down the corridor. 'And don't come back! And are you going to complain?' she thundered at Ron.

'No, no,' he replied shakily, looking terrified of Hermione.

The rest of the trip seemed much more pleasant and Ron even began talking. Harry tried to feel less animosity towards him and as he grovelled and apologised every five minutes he knew he'd be able to forgive him. When the train pulled in and they walked through the barrier at Kings Cross Station Harry turned to Ron.

'It wont be easy but I can try to forgive you,' said Harry. 'But I cant forget what you've done and from now on I'll be watching you like a hawk.'

'I hope you do,' spluttered Ron, 'and punch me if you think I'm being idiot or a threat.'

Harry laughed and shook Ron's hand, who then turned around and into a huge hug from Mrs Weasley. Harry was grabbed by Hermione, who kissed him strongly.

'I promise I wont let you go a day without hearing from me,' said Hermione. 'I might even come and see you. In any case, Dumbledore said you only have to stay at Privet Drive for a week then you can come and stay with me again. I'll see you soon.'

Harry hugged Hermione again before walking to his Uncle. This could be the best Summer yet.